

# The Irish Temptress

Penny Best

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Acknowledgments

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@pennybestwriter

**Also**

**by Penny Best**

The Wild Irish Lust series of novellas

Novel

The Widow's Passion

*For you the reader*

# The Irish Temptress

*Forbidden love on a remote island*

# Chapter 1

The fancy carriage left Lola at Rockford Pier in South Donegal. This raven-haired lady moved the hood of a cloak to shield her cheeks from the biting April wind coming in from the Atlantic. The rowboat she was expecting, with the dark-red sails, was visible and getting closer. Three bodies aboard toiled against the waves of lough Túr.

Lola sat elegantly on her battered, travelling trunk and smelled the Irish air that she'd missed since she was a small child. The language around her was thick and the words were mostly all about her. She knew this because Mrs Beatty had wet-nursed Lola on her milk and mother tongue. She had a very good grasp on what they were saying – even if she wasn't confident enough to reply. Most of the comments were to be expected, and referred to her beauty and the way she was dressed. It wasn't often a woman with large ringlets, stood in a man's cloak and an expensive purple day dress on Rockford's pier.

The fishermen huddled, surveying her at a discreet distance. But there was no fear in Lola. With the welcome end to many years of desperate famine, the Irish gentry still thought that the remaining tenants and labourers were thieves. But, Lola never agreed with such chatter.

The Isle of Sands was her destination and further out into the bay it sat in the wild swell. To her artistic eye, the mound looked like a grey breast in a swirling bath of frothy milk. Travelling alone was risky, but Mrs Beatty's instructions had been clear. Whoever wrote the letter for her had done well. Considering the distance it travelled it was also fortuitous that Lola had received it. Lola desperately missed Paris. It never ceased to amaze her how infinite the earth seemed.

Clutching a green embroidered bag by its strings, Lola shuffled her feet. It had been many years since she saw her beloved nurse. Much had happened. Where might she begin with her stories to Mrs Beatty? Those old rosy cheeks and beautiful smile would greet her with outstretched arms hugging her in as usual. How good it would



be to be held against that lavender-scented bosom. It would be good to feel she was home again. She needed and longed for a safe place to rest and be at peace.

The clouds gathered as the men did. Closer and closer still. The mood greyed and the small boat dropped its red sails like they were petticoats in a brothel. A holler from the drontheim boat made the shore-men clamber down the stone steps. They called back that they'd take the line in so that the wooden hull could pull alongside. Lola was jostled but she stood fast.

The man with a cap, in the aft of the wooden boat, cursed loudly and glared upwards. With a large black moustache it was hard to avoid the boat captain's handsome features. His broad chest and shoulders were covered in a woollen jumper and he wore no shirt or necktie. All of the men were far from clean, and yet this scruffy man stood out. He caught Lola's eye as he worked with hard hands on the main sail and then motioned for Lola to move out of the way. Lola had to obey or she would be trampled or knocked off the pier. She wanted to protest, but there was an immediate lure to be near him, to catch his attention or to get him to speak.

The tension settled and all eyes fell upon Lola. Standing forward with conviction, she removed the hood of the cape. Breaths were held.

With her gaze fixed on the handsome boatman she said as confidently as she could muster, 'I am for the Isle of Sands.'

'Are you now?' the moustached man replied and came level with her as he took the steps two at a time. 'We'll have to see if the weather will let any of us do our work this day. This is yours, I take it?' He knocked hard on her trunk with a rough hand. 'That'll cost a pretty penny to get down those narrow steps and then up onto the rocks at the Sands.'

'I have means.'

It was then that he looked directly at her. He was one of the finest-looking men Lola had ever seen (and she had seen a great many men). There was a grin and those unusually blue eyes smiled, too, and he wiped the back of his hand across his sweated brow. Lola was instantly taken with this strong, handsome man's demeanour. He was intriguing. It was unusual for Lola to find strangers so beguiling.

'Are you sure it's the Isle of Sands you're looking for?' he asked. 'For it might be Sand Island you mean? That's a long way from

here.'

'I am looking to go to the Isle of Sands.' Her voice was tired.

'What's taking you there?' he asked, pulling back on his tattered cap as he peered again at beautiful Lola.

'Mrs Beatty,' Lola said. She was sure that the name would be recognised. From listening to all of the childhood tales over the years her friend was well-loved. The man's face grew grave and his mouth opened for a brief moment. He sighed. Lola sensed a problem and glanced around to get a handle on the quietness.

'You've come a long distance to see our Mrs Beatty?' he asked, taking off the cap again and his brow furrowed. He leaned against the pier wall and observed the woman before him.

'I have, but she will give me shelter. I've known her since I was child. She'll be happy to see me as I will be to see her,' Lola said.

'You do know that there's a famine in these parts?' he asked, looking at the finery Lola was wearing. 'Have you ever been here before?'

Lola stared at the man in the torn britches and dirtied boots and almost listed all the places she'd been in her thirty years of life, but instead, she answered with a determined, 'Yes. I know about the famine. And no, I've not been here before. How much will you need to take me to Mrs Beatty's cottage?'

'A lady such as yourself thinks that she will be lodging in Beatty's old hovel?' He chuckled and raised his voice to inform some onlookers, 'She aims to stay on the Sands.'

There were sniggers. He was making them laugh at her expense but he wasn't cruel. There was mutual admiration between them.

'I was assured that your boat would take me there for a reasonable price,' Lola said.

'Who said that?'

'Lord Rockford.'

A voice from the gathered gawkers said, 'She came in his carriage, so she did.'

He raised his eyebrow in an endearing manner and he let out a low whistle. 'Did you stay at the Big House so?'

'I aim to go to The Isle of Sands today,' Lola said.

'Someone needs to tell her,' another voice from the crowd said.

Lola rubbed her flimsy lace gloves together in angst as a chill ran through her. The man stood tall and lowered his shoulders and tilted that handsome dark hair. His sideburns twitched as he made a

sympathetic smile and said, 'We lost our dear Mrs Beatty this winter. God rest her beautiful soul.'

The words struck Lola like a slap. Her chest heaved in sorrow before she believed him. A sob spluttered. 'No?' she breathed heavily and grabbed at her heart. The corset felt tighter than it ever was.

'It wasn't from the hunger though. We know this must be a shock for she wasn't that old,' he said. 'It was sudden enough but we made sure she was comfortable. We all cared for her.'

'Yes.' Lola held the bridge of her nose instinctively holding back tears.

'I can take you back to Rockford House?' he said.

Lola never considered going backwards in her life and she wasn't going to start now. 'I must go to the Isle of Sands,' she said with conviction.

'I think you should reconsider, Mrs...?' He waited.

'I am Lola de Lacy,' she said.

'Mrs de Lacy, you cannot expect to spend even one night on the Sands?' The amusement was back in his tone. 'It's the most unsuitable place for a lady such as yourself. Especially now with Mrs Beatty gone and her cottage shut up for so long. It's not the place for you. I'm certain of it.'

His command of English and the flow of his tongue around the words showed that he was more educated than most. But from his obvious lingering looks he wasn't a gentleman and he didn't try to be. She liked the way he looked at her though. But, she didn't like how this labouring man was so certain about her. He had the audacity to think that he knew her, yet he had no idea what Lola de Lacy was capable of. 'Will you take me or not? Or will I have to attempt swimming?' she asked more curtly than she had intended.

Looking out into the grey waters, he smirked. 'There aren't many people left on the island. What makes you think that this is a good idea? Look out there, Mrs De Lacy and tell me why you wouldn't want to go back into the splendour of Rockford House instead?'

'Lady Rockford is my reason,' Lola said, peering into the horizon where his finger pointed. 'She is my reason for not returning there. Now. Are we going on the turning tide before those rain clouds come closer? I'll pay double your usual price – if you just simply take me with no more questions.'

Lola let that information rattle around in his mind. It was more than she'd wanted to share, but she was weak and needed a sip of water and to be inside somewhere warm soon. 'I'll also need a man to take my trunk to Beatty Cottage. Please.'

He moved his weight from one foot to the other. Lola felt many eyes watching her.

'Take this to the boat!' he ordered in Gaelic to one of his crew with a tug on the man's arm. 'Go easy with it too.'

'Thank you,' Lola said.

'You know our language?' he asked in Gaelic.

'Seá.' Lola rarely spoke Mrs Beatty's language but 'yes' was easy to recall.

'I'll see you get to the island safe and sound. But, I'll be taking you back here tomorrow. I know I will.'

'One step at a time, Mr...'

'Fitzgerald. Jack C Fitzgerald. Can you manage the steps?' Jack asked, looking at the long hem on her dress.

'I am a dancer,' Lola admitted, wishing she would let herself take his arm to steady her nerve. Touching him would be nice. 'I will manage,' she said with conviction.

'I could take your hand?' Jack asked but stood back as Lola moved down the narrow stone steps with ease and hoisted her skirts high to toss a leg over into the boat. Lola suspected the audience on the pier saw her stockinged calf and ankle but she didn't care. Jack pointed to a wooden bench and, nestling into it, Lola pulled the hood of Lord Rockford's cape forward and hid her apprehension from view. There was a thud of her trunk being positioned in a few different places for ballast. Lola closed her eyes, fingered the stolen pearls, and said a silent prayer for Mrs Beatty's soul and for her own future.

As bad as this man Jack Fitzgerald thought the Sands were, Lola was leaving something much more horrific behind. When the wind caught the deep-red sails, it gave the boat and Lola a surge of momentum. It might take a few tacks to reach the far shore, but Lola sat steadfast in her journey to a new life.

## Chapter 2

This morning, when Jack had jumped from the straw mattress in his father's house, he hadn't anticipated meeting anyone he wished to impress. He had absent-mindedly pulled on his boots without washing his neck and face. The sleep was picked from the corner of his eyes on their first passage over to the Sands and he'd spat up from his lungs when the boat settled in to run with the wind. The rise of his body's odour was pleasant to himself until he thought of being next to this well-dressed woman.

Everyone said Jack C Fitzgerald was a fine cut of a man but nothing had prepared him for when he finally looked at the woman's face. His insides curled and his groin stirred. She was a beauty. More than that, this creature was a vision. The devastated look when she heard of Mrs Beatty hurt him physically. His poor mother, long gone now, sat in his memory. It was a long time since the sight of a woman's pain had affected him this much. He would have to protect this pretty woman now. There would be no way he could allow her to look so upset again.

'She's well able for you,' Patrick, his father mocked in Gaelic as they wrestled with her words and the heavy trunk. None of them had gained permission to help her into the boat. This exotic creature was far from fragile. Brown eyes darted iron-clad looks when she spoke. Those slender cheeks pinked on the wind were healthy compared to others Jack knew. Her lips were full and he found himself staring at the longest eyelashes.

The other men saw her, too, because they openly stared at her wide hips and slender frame. Women were supposed to be easily controlled and yet this Mrs Lola de Lacy with her fancy name and clothes was far from easy to fathom. What connection had she to Mrs Beatty? Jack rifled through the memories of his fireside conversations with Mrs B, but there were many of them and his head was fluttering like his belly.

Mrs de Lacy replied to the Irish tongue yet she admitted to never having been in this part of Donegal before. She was a bewildering puzzle. A complicated test. Jack opened his mouth to tell this

woman that whatever she wanted – he would do his damndest to provide it – but he stopped himself. He was bewitched.

The sail out to the island was uneventful and they had no reason to move the lady from her perch. Their own shifting of positions was enough to tilt the hull and fill the sails on each tack to the far shore. The creak of the ropes and the whoosh of the wood on water always satisfied Jack's soul. There was something grand about trusting the Fair Lass to do her duty. His crew knew their Fair Lass like a man knows his wife. Not that any of them had a woman of their own. Without speaking or much instruction the crew coordinated her cut through the water with ease. She was a good boat. Jack might not have known women, but he instinctively appreciated the line of a sailing vessel.

Watching the straight back of the woman Jack grew in stature. She was another fair lass. There was an air of promise on the wind, a slight sense of trouble lingered, but the tinge of adventure tickled his taste buds. There was no doubt that this creature was something different.

His cousin, Michael was only a skinny mirror of a Fitzgerald man. However, he had good strength for ropes, nets and for life on the water. Jack couldn't help smiling as he watched Michael trying to look at this princess, without being seen by anyone else.

Patrick nudged Michael with an elbow telling him to, 'Stop with the staring.' Patrick rolled his eyes back at his son and started at exactly the same pastime that he told Michael off for. Jack laughed out loud, but no one paid any heed. Patrick's curled dark hair needed cut, as it tousled about in the breeze. For a man in his forties, Patrick was sticking life well, with not much grey or baldness. He looked older and wiser with a beard but Patrick had shorn it off when patches of grey appeared almost overnight. His smooth, tanned jaw was still as firm as his chest and arm muscles.

Jack provided work for his extended family. It meant he was making something of the fire in his heart. Ambition was not always rewarded, but luck was on the Fitzgeralds' side for a while at least. When the crops failed and when times were really tough, they'd clung onto their patch of land, their meagre house and now Jack had the Fair Lass. He had made it with the help of a master boatbuilder who was taken, like Mrs Beatty was, of the consumption. There were very few women left to help with repopulation in this part of Donegal. Jack had waited on the

famine, then the sickness, and now fate to overturn their prosperity.

‘Evil deeds don’t go unpunished,’ Patrick told him, but so far there was nothing to spoil Jack’s progress in the world, despite the worry that wouldn’t dislodge from his overactive brain.

There was nothing and no one on the Sands for the likes of his passenger. He saw hope in her eyes when the boat’s main sail billowed them onwards. She also seemed taken with him. Her eyes rarely left his own until she heard the sad news. Little did she know now about what she was heading towards. No one like her would be fit for the bleak existence of the island. She was wearing one of those fancy dresses that needed unlaced. Who would do that for her? She’d expected dear Mrs B to do it. But there wasn’t one woman on the whole island. Not one. What on earth would the Lord of the Sands make of her?

Jack and everyone had learned to call the exiled child (who was now a man) Lord of the Sands. He was quite the character. But, no one minded giving in to his whims. What would transpire if Lola saw the Lord of the Sands bathing naked, which he did every morning without fail? They would be an interesting pair together. Jack gripped the rope tighter.

The cottage was as pretty as Mrs B could have made it all by herself, but it wasn’t exactly Rockford House or somewhere grand. Hopefully, the sickness had left its walls as people would not stay there in fear. He should have mentioned the consumption, but she was here now in the wilds of Donegal, all alone and there was no point in making things worse.

Mrs Beatty had been housemaid and lady’s maid in her day, returning in her twilight years to live out her days as a respected spinster. She’d lasted well in her childhood home, despite being the only woman for many miles. But she couldn’t have thought this woman would enjoy seeing the Sands. Why had she encouraged the likes of this woman to come all this way to a rural, backward island?

Perhaps the de Lacys had employed Mrs B. But then surely she’d not stoop so low as to come and stay with a servant. There was something amiss. There was something unsettling about a woman like Mrs de Lacy appearing out of the blue like this.

Where would she even sleep? There wasn’t anything of worth in Mrs Beatty’s. There was basic furniture; an old table and stool. Jack doubted there was even a proper chair or pot to piss in.

There would be tears. Women cried when shocked or upset and the state of the island and Mrs B's cottage would take tears from a stone.

'Are you well?' his father, Patrick asked back at the woman as he could see her face from his angle in the boat. He shot a worried look at Jack. The nod of the cape said yes to the question but Patrick asked again moments later. Suddenly there was a slump backwards and her body was tossed into Jack's arms. The rope was abandoned to stop her head hitting the side of the boat and she murmured softly as Jack supported her back and Michael tried to take charge of the flapping sail.

'She's okay,' Jack shouted to his crew. 'Bit pale and possibly a bit sick.' With that, the lady in his arms who smelled so lovely heaved out a mouthful of vomit. Her aim was for the water but the wind lashed it backwards and against Jack and herself. She clung to him and the stench rose but he let her rest against his shoulder.

'Sorry,' she muttered. Jack removed the hood and let the breeze at her face. The ringlets danced with the movement of the wind when he looked down. His arm curled around her shoulders to add more strength to her position and to his own. If she wasn't so weak, this would be quite a nice place to keep her.

'Rest here,' he said. 'Don't move.' She was soft and warm. He was needed by a lady. 'It's just the seasickness.' He was trying to reassure her as he wasn't going back to the mainland. The light was failing as it was.

'Mal de mer,' she said but didn't move and stayed firm against him. 'Sorry.'

Jack raised his eyebrows at the others. They grinned.

'The smell of me will not make you feel any better,' Jack admitted, still clinging her body to him. 'It's me who is sorry. I should have asked if you minded the water.'

'I don't usually get sick. I've been travelling for a long time and never been ill on a boat. I am so sorry,' she said, clenching her eyes closed as the waves suddenly tilted them all.

Jack gripped her even closer. 'We've not got far to go now,' he whispered as if she were a frightened child. There was another wrenching sound and his boots got covered in vomit. When she raised her head, the back of her hand wiped the remains from the corner of her mouth. Horrified eyes peered at him from a very pale complexion. 'I'm mortified,' she said and took a handkerchief from



her little string bag and went to wipe at Jack's legs and boots.

The embroidered material fluttered as Jack held it and her hand back from the mess. 'There's no need. These will get washed when I set us ashore.'

She looked from her hand, to the tattered trouser leg to the sodden boots and back to Jack's amused grin. She smiled despite her obvious weakness. 'Sweet goodness.' She chuckled. 'You'll not forget this trip.'

Jack Fitzgerald nodded his agreement. He would never forget this as long as he lived.

## Chapter 3

Lola scrambled from the boat on her hands and knees. It was undignified. Thankfully, there were no onlookers on the damp rocky promontory the men called the Sands landing place. Standing up, she was unbalanced but she dusted herself off and fixed her hair a little.

‘I’m fine,’ she said at Patrick who looked at her with concern. She’d never seen a more gentle man in such awful clothes. On the journey over his kind brown eyes only left her to check on the sails and rocks. He was somehow related to the very handsome man who was impressing her more and more. They were of the same built, eyes and kind demeanour.

‘Father,’ Jack called and threw Patrick a rope. Lola smiled. She should have guessed that they were kin. There was a similar softness to their manliness. So, the younger boy might also be family. He blushed as she followed him at his work heaving the trunk. Yes, the youngster was also a Fitzgerald.

Lord Rockford was wrong about a lot of things, but he had found her good men for the last leg of the journey. They were all admiring her, but she didn’t feel uncomfortable in their presence. They were good men. Especially Jack. He was definitely special. She would see more of him, if he came to and fro from the shore. That lifted her spirits.

She surveyed the island. Misting rain was settling into the smooth green hillocks in the distance, but the place welcomed Lola with a gentle breeze. She closed her eyes and smelt the air. There it was, the smell of rural Ireland.

‘The Isle of Sands is like nowhere on God’s good earth,’ Mrs B said. ‘It breathes life into a tired heart and smells of rain, salt and turf. When I lived there all those years ago now, Someday you’ll know the pretty sanctuary of its clear goodness. She is a queen of a place. Yes, she let me leave her to find you. I will unite the two of you.’

Lola spied the tiny beach where Mrs B told her she had watched the swirling wind off the dunes towards the rocky field with their

low stone walls. Along the shoreline were inlets of sand and rock and on the next large rocky outcrop there stood a stone turret.

‘Sands Light,’ the thin boy said following her sight line. ‘Fáilte romhat.’ Lola liked the way the young fellow’s hair flopped past his eyebrows. What a pleasant smile he had as he welcomed her in Gaelic.

‘There isn’t much here,’ Jack said loudly from the boat. ‘I did warn you.’

Lola didn’t need to answer as she swung to her right and watched the sheep graze quietly. Some looked up.

‘Sheep,’ Jack called out to her.

‘Is that what you call them?’ Lola mocked. ‘I’m more interested in knowing who the men are that are carrying my truck expertly across these rocks.’

‘Patrick my father is the tall one, and Michael my cousin – he’s the skinny one.’

‘Aren’t you coming ashore?’

‘We’ll need to leave the Fair Lass at anchor and swim in.’

‘Mrs Beatty’s home cannot be far?’ Lola smiled broadly, remembering her naughty nursemaid, ‘she said that she could spit to the sea.’

Jack guffawed and stopped to stare deeply at Lola. ‘We miss her too. Follow your belongings,’ came the command after a few seconds when their staring at each other ended. ‘Go.’

Lola remembered to breathe. Normally, she would never obey a man’s instructions, but she desperately wanted to see what was ahead. Turning around, she followed the track of the men. Her shoes were not made for slippery, jagged rocks or for the deep damp sand. Seaweed slithered underfoot and Lola was sure she could hear Jack laughing again. She giggled too. When she reached the dirt road she swung back to curtsy at the man in the boat. He waved and she returned the gesture.

Michael was returning, Lola heard his feet thudding into a run.

‘Welcome to the island,’ Michael muttered on passing her. Lola quickly thrust a hand into her pocket-bag and retrieved a coin which she pressed into the blushing boy’s hand. He felt cold to the touch. As she hoisted her skirts she thought she should wait on Jack to come too. It would be mannerly. However, the gable of a dwelling came into her sight and her curiosity was getting the better of her.

‘Home is a beautiful thing. It’s not a place as such, more a feeling in your loins. A thumping belonging,’ Mrs Beatty said. ‘Wherever you feel safe and loved – that is home.’

As Lola walked the flagstones and around to the half-door which faced away from the sea, she pictured her very own Mrs Beatty on the stool just inside it. The darkness took time to adjust to but Patrick was opening one of the two, small, shuttered windows. He pulled the large blanket from the other window and another from the empty dresser. The table was caked in dust and the mantel lopsided. There was a bedstead in the far corner with no mattress. A washstand was minus its jug. The basin in it was chipped and grimy. Patrick’s head was nearer the thick rafters, but Lola’s had ample room to explore the one room.

‘This is not bad?’ he questioned. Those concerned eyes were back upon her. The earthen floor and the cobwebs became more visible and Lola leaned down to look out the window. The bubbled, thick glass showed greens and blues from outside and little else. ‘It’s not bad,’ Patrick continued and coughed from the dust.

Lola was glad he spoke in English. She replied, ‘Go deas. It’s nice.’

Patrick looked shocked at her reply. But the place was ‘nice’ to Lola. It was Mrs B’s and she was going to make it a lovely home. Placing a gloved hand on the wall, Lola told the stones, ‘I am home. Abhaile. Táim abhaile.’

Patrick’s dark eyes were wide and he leant against the table. Lola wanted to ask him why was he smiling at her in that manner, but she didn’t. There was a smell that wafted around. She sniffed her front and gloves and looked at the man with her. She didn’t want to insult him, so she ignored the scent and searched the space further. There was a rotten cupboard next to the washstand. It would have to go. A cracked mirror on a hook in the crumbling wall smiled back. Lola heard Patrick scrape at the fireplace. He was trying to resurrect her hearth. She nodded and placed a hand on his shoulder in thanks.

The bed took her attention. The springs were good and the frame sturdy as she shook it. Dust fell from everything she touched. There was nothing of Mrs B left. Nothing personal. A tear formed and Lola swallowed hard.

‘Well?’ Jack’s voice boomed. ‘Not what you thought it would be?’

Lola stepped back for he might have dripped all over her dress. He was soaking from his swim and his hair was slicked back. He was cleaner-looking and even more handsome. Everything about him, even his old attire, pleased Lola.

‘She said she’s home,’ Patrick told him without getting up from his knees under the mantel. ‘You better mention the Lord of the Sands.’

‘There’s only men on this island,’ Jack said, obviously trying to shock her.

Lola took double the price Lord Rockford suggested from her purse and left it on the table. She’d need these men again and she’d made a promise of payment. Even if she was staying and felt ready for the challenge ahead, there would be a need for good men. There always was. ‘Did you hear me?’ Jack tried a little louder and folded his arms. ‘It’s not proper for you to be here alone.’

‘I never worry about what’s proper. You don’t strike me as someone who does either.’

His jumper was sodden and his cheeks took on a tremble. Patrick had the fire smoking at least but Jack looked wretchedly cold. ‘You must be frozen,’ she said.

‘I’ll live.’

Lola smirked. He liked to be the strongest one.

‘We have our hovel up the road. I’ll get changed in a bit.’

Lola spun around. They lived on the island?

‘It’s nothing fancy. It’s for storage mostly and we stay an odd time on the Sands. It’s in our blood. Hard not to be drawn back here.’

Mrs Beatty had always longed for home and now that Lola was here she might never leave again.

‘You’re a woman of few words,’ Jack said. ‘What will your own people say about you living on an island in the wilds of the Atlantic?’

‘They do not know where I am.’ Lola took off her cloak and noticed that the scent was from herself. Travelling and sickness mingled with perspiration. There was nowhere to hang the cloak so she left it over the brass end of the bed.

‘Why, Mrs Beatty? Why come here? How did you know her?’ Jack asked.

‘You’re a man of many questions,’ Lola replied, looking at Patrick’s laden arms full of dried turf sods. He placed three of

them on the smouldering embers. 'I'll need supplies,' she muttered to herself as much as them with a tightened jaw. 'You've both been very kind, but I will have to ask you for more help. I left your money on the table and we can discuss payment for other things.'

'There's a rick of turf in the yard and I have Mrs B's old mattress,' Jack said. 'We'll take it back, along with the other bits and bobs.'

'I'll pay.'

'You need to see them first. They aren't worth much.' Jack stood back and watched Lola rip a strip of her petticoat to use as a rag for dusting the table. 'Don't you want to know who else are your neighbours?' he asked as she busied herself.

'I'll meet them soon enough.'

'You're pale and in need of something warm. Father is good at cooking. Sit down and let him work. I'll go get dry and bring back as much as I can manage. Michael can give me a hand.'

Lola plopped to the stool without rubbing it clean. 'Thank you, Mr Fitzgerald.'

'Jack. They all call me Jack.'

He didn't take the money from the table and he winked before he left. Lola peered around the door from her seat to watch the stride of him leave and felt her temperature rise.

# Chapter 4

Getting Mrs Beatty's things back to the cottage didn't take long. Jack waited but there were no tears about the state of the island or the dwelling. He was going to mention Mrs Beatty's sickness, but it was unnecessary to burden their beautiful traveller any further. Houses and islands weren't cursed no matter what people said and this woman couldn't fit in the hovel they used themselves. It was best not to mention illnesses that were long gone.

The night fell quickly and Michael did a good job at bringing in lots of fuel for the fire. The heat blasted up and out from the grate and Jack recalled the nights he spent warmed at this fire with the nice old woman they all missed.

His father's dinner of rabbit stew smelled appetising and the potatoes were boiled well. There wasn't a sign of blight or blackness in them.

With the others not speaking much, it fell to Jack to fill the silences between the mouthfuls. There was something about it being polite to speak with an empty mouth. Jack didn't concern himself too much with that and licked his knife.

'This is delicious, Patrick,' Lola said. 'Thank you. I'm not a good cook.'

Patrick smiled.

'How can a woman not be a good cook?' Jack asked. 'You've always had servants to do your work for you?'

'Not always. I'm just not gifted at mixing ingredients together over heat and making them edible.'

She spoke well and was educated and mentioned being a dancer. She shouldn't be travelling alone or sitting eating rabbit stew in an Irish cottage with three men. But here she was.

'Are you not worried about your safety?' he asked Lola.

'Are you not trustworthy, Mr Fitzgerald?'

'We are good men. But, we're not used to a lady eating with us and you don't know what else lurks about the Sands?'

'I'll be fine. I've lived in worse places and I feel quite safe here.'

Jack sat and observed the woman. The three of them were

mesmerised by her; there was no belching, cursing or farting, no coarse language, and definitely no scratching of their groins. The lady was changing their behaviour and all three of them were different men. They each were gentle in her presence.

Then why was he jealous of her continuing compliments of his father's food? And young Michael was blushed crimson for most of the last few hours. The heat of the fire could be blamed but it was more the attention of Lola that was rising the young blood in him. It couldn't be helped, for there weren't many ladies in these remote parts of a famine-ravaged Donegal.

'The island is only two miles wide at it's widest point and less than a mile long,' Jack told her, 'but there's been plenty of badness here too.'

'It's bigger than I thought,' Lola replied and ate her mouthful before she put in another spoonful. Possibly that was good manners and Jack would try to do the same with his second helpings. 'Who else lives here then?' she asked. 'Only men you said? How long has it been this way?'

'Since Mrs B passed but we've been short on women for many years,' Jack told her, scraping the pot and asked, 'Do you want more?'

'A little please. It's very tasty.'

Lola moved her right arm gingerly and winced every now and again when she used it.

'Is there something wrong with your arm? You look paler too.'

'I'm fine.'

The bread soaked up the remaining sauce as Jack replied, 'You asked about those living here. There's the three of us, the Lord of the Sands, and the light-keeper Mr Seanín Childs, and old ratbag, Ivan the schoolmaster. They'll all call here to see you, no doubt about that.'

Patrick made a face at Jack, warning him off being derogatory about old Ivan. It was hard to like a man who drank more poteen than he did teaching.

'The Lord of the Sands? What age is he? And this light-keeper, is he his father?' Lola asked.

'We're surprised they haven't noticed you're here. The Lord of the Sands will be around tomorrow without fail. Mr Childs is an odd man. Like all light-keepers, he's a dark sort.' Jack chuckled at his own joke. 'The Lord of the Sands's age is hard to tell as we



always think of him as a boy and Mr Childs is possibly my age. That's twenty-five. But no, he's not the Lord of the Sands's father.'

The cottage was cosy and Jack removed his cleanest jumper. His shirt was creased from the washing line but he was sweating and needed cooling.

'I'm thirty. I know you're curious,' Lola said. 'Just this year I became an old woman.'

She didn't look a day over twenty. Her honesty was surprising. Everything about the woman was interesting. 'Where did you travel from?' he asked.

'Rockford House,' she said, being evasive.

'Before that,' Jack said, not easily deterred when he was on the hunt. 'What took you to this godforsaken place?' The rain had started, he could hear it pelt the windows. The earthen roof would hopefully stick the drenching and not let in any of the deluge.

'Mrs Beatty kindly told me I'd always be welcome here.'

Jack looked around at the meagre abode. Yet, this fine lady didn't show any sign of disappointment.

'I think I may have heard from this Lord of The Sands who you mentioned,' she said. 'He wrote a letter or two for Mrs B and I am going to be very grateful to him for helping her.'

The Lord of the Sands wasn't known for being kindly to anyone, but perhaps in the dark wintry nights before her death, Mrs B might have persuaded him to lend her his educated ways for an hour. Jack's fist clenched. The Lord of the Sands had written to Mrs de Lacy. It was just typical that the likes of him would get to a nice lady first and communicate with her by letter. Jack's lip twitched. 'It would suit the man better if he agreed to us making a jetty or somewhere to tie the Fair Lass ashore.'

'Does he not want you here?' Lola asked and stabbed Jack with the truth.

'He wants to keep all of this for himself alone. Doesn't want people cluttering his life. He's a selfish, spoiled man,' Jack said as he watched the flames leap in the hearth. 'Thinks he owns the place.'

'And does he?' Lola asked.

'Lord Rockford is the only landowner about here.'

'Of course,' Lola said. 'But how is there a Lord, on the Sands?' Even Patrick chuckled at that.

'He was banished I suppose you'd call it. He has been here since

he was a young fellow. He's English, of course,' Jack explained. 'Ivan the schoolmaster came with him. Neither speak to each other now but neither leave here – for whatever reason.'

'This is like a prison island then?' Lola said.

'Aye. Yes, I suppose it is,' Jack replied. 'Mrs Beatty saw it as home. When she was growing up here it was a thriving community. But they say the mermaids cursed this place a few generations back. One of the beauties came ashore and fell in love with a fisherman. He rebuked her and married a woman instead. The curse was that no woman would ever give birth again on the Isle of Sands. The population dwindled out and no woman could stay, thinking she'd never have a child.'

Lola smiled. Nothing seemed to shock this lady. 'You don't think this Lord of The Sands will welcome me then?' she asked, 'even though he wrote those letters?'

'He's odd as two left feet. Lives in an old folly of the Rockford estate. He's doesn't do anything but read books, and practise his drawings and swimming.'

'He sounds very interesting.'

She had a faraway gleam in her eye when he mentioned the Lord of the Sands. Of course, she would value learning and art, and he made that dose of a man sound appealing. 'We best get moving and let you get settled in for the night,' Jack said curtly and motioned to his father and Michael to gather themselves. 'We rise early. If you want to leave the Sands, we can take you back to the mainland in the morning.'

Lola looked around her and listened to the rain for a second or two. 'I'm comfortable for now, Mr Fitzgerald, thank you. When might you return to the Sands? I'll need supplies.'

'Make a list. Young Michael and the storekeeper can read English,' Jack said. His voice was snappy. 'Depending on the weather it might be a day or two. Will you survive until then?'

'Of course,' Lola said. 'I will be glad of the turf stack even if it isn't big and I'll set a few snares. The rabbit is tasty here.'

The men all stood and stared. She was serious and her in long fancy petticoats and skirt tails and not a mark on her smooth hands.

'It won't take much to feed me and the cottage will get warmer and keep me dry. Don't look so uncertain about leaving me. I'm also good with a blade and have a pistol in the trunk. I will be here waiting on my list of materials. Let me make it now quickly. Would

you mind waiting another moment or two?’

The others left with a nod and Jack watched as this unusual woman carefully drew a ribbon from her cleavage. On the end was a key and she opened the large trunk and bent over as she delved inside.

She was an impressive figure of a woman. Jack’s groin groaned against his britches. He’d have to think of something else and fast. Picturing her under him was not helping the lump between his legs. He moved away closer to the door and started counting to one hundred in his mind. The firelight made her look magical when he finally gave in to watching her again. The glow gave the beauty shadows and it danced across that skin. His father always spoke of his mother’s beauty but he hadn’t appreciated how a woman could enter a man’s heart and turn it to mush. She put the tip of the quill into her mouth and ink dripped off the tip and Jack had to turn around and start his counting again.

‘There,’ she said, thrusting the paper forward when Jack walked back to greet it. ‘And don’t forget the money on the table. We said double. And I will pay you for the supplies when you know its cost and the amount you need for bringing it. Perhaps I should arrange that now? Look at the list and let us strike a bargain.’

Jack didn’t need to look at any list, or take money from the table. He shook his head. ‘There is no need for a bargain. We’ll be back here in a few days. Picking up a few things is not difficult to do. There’ll be no charge. Just promise me that you will look after yourself until then. Your arm is paining you and you look frightfully pale. Mrs Beatty will come back from the grave to haunt me if I let anything happen to you.’

Lola smiled and Jack gulped back admiration. She held out her left hand and said, ‘That’s a deal, Mr Fitzgerald.’

Jack’s hand instinctively found the soft skin and held it tightly. He came closer and held her fingers to his lips. He closed his eyes and inhaled as his kiss connected them both. ‘Goodnight. Sleep tight,’ he said. It was what he dreamt his mother used to say and it felt comforting to say it to this woman.

‘Yes. Goodnight and Sleep tight. Let’s hope the bed bugs don’t bite,’ Lola said with a glint in her eye. Jack grinned. She knew the rhyme. ‘Thank you and I’ll see you in a few days,’ she promised.

Jack dragged his hand and eyes away from her and nodded. ‘Goodbye, Mrs de Lacy.’

Walking down the path Jack was a totally different man. What was happening to him? Whatever it was, it felt nice. Mrs Beatty was casting magic from the grave. He thanked her, the angels or whatever led such a wonderful woman into his life.

# Chapter 5

Lola de Lacy was used to men. Most of them found her charms attractive. Since she was a young girl, it was part of the repertoire she unfurled every day. As males used their brawn, Lola used her feminine beauty and guile. It was instinctive and then, of course, others had come along and educated her in how to utilise her abilities to their utmost potential.

Sitting watching the fire, she pulled the shawl and her large blanket around her shuddering shoulders. The place was warm but she couldn't stop shivering. Mrs Beatty's presence surrounded her now when she needed it the most. Thankfully, her nurse was an always present layer of comfort for Lola.

'You are safe now,' Mrs Beatty said to Lola as a child as they were on the ship fleeing to France. Lola's father paced the deck and the seas lashed the sides. 'We're going to survive this passage and you'll be teaching me French,' Mrs Beatty said. Nothing shifted that calm exterior. Nothing. Not even watching her mistress and Lola's mother bleed out on the road to the boat. Both women had fended off the three thieves with a bayonet and an empty rifle. 'Your father won't be sober for long, my little one. It's his fault that we were attacked on the flit here. Him hiding out and providing no escort despite the danger. And he'll not want to have to explain the absence of your mother. Fool! Duels and gambling indeed.'

'You'll never leave me?' Lola cried into that big Irish bosom. 'Never leave me.'

'Never, child. Even in death I'll always be with you. Just as your darling mother is now. She is close by, watching and caring for you still. Never fear. You have powerful women surrounding you forever more. You are going to survive this and many more trials. I can see that there is strong blood coursing through your veins – despite your wretch of a father.'

Lola was blessed by the strong women she knew. They were by her side on that terrible day when she was just twelve years old and they kept her safe. She still felt them both close, guiding her. Even when Lola's father had abandoned her to fornicate and ruin himself

in the brothels of Paris, Mrs Beatty had stood firm. The journey homewards in less than a year had come from Mrs Beatty's own light purse, and her persuading tongue had seen Lola's clan take them both in out of the freezing winter and threat of the workhouse. Lola would never forget how a servant had loved her like her own. And yet again, it was Mrs Beatty who was sheltering her all over again. That made everything better.

Tears fell now as Lola thought of the breath of her dear friend ending. She had seemed immortal. Nothing had prepared Lola for Mrs Beatty's death. It was like a piece of her own heart was missing. What on earth was she going to do without her most treasured friend?

She loosened the laces in her corset and heaved it off. The pistol was loaded, and possibly damp, but Lola checked it again and tucked it into the side of the bare mattress as she lay watching the fire and hoped that sleep would take her away.



\* \* \*

The morning light in the Sands was beautiful. It played with the dust in its sunbeams and Lola woke with a start. The fire was dying but with a few blows from the small bellows and a sprinkling of some kindling it started to spark and came back to life. Lola talked to Mrs Beatty as she woke herself to the situation.

'I'll live. I'm safe now. I miss you.'

The pot still had some water in it and it started to warm thanks to the thin bottom and new turf sods. The metal griddle creaked as Lola moved the pot about for a better position. Standing tall, Lola sighed and stretched out her back and looked around. The cut on her collarbone stung and the numb throb in her arm was cumbersome.

In the daylight, the cottage looked unclean, but Lola had seen

worse and the smell of the remaining stew was not unpleasant. She didn't want to wait to reheat it and although it was cold, the taste was still nice. There was no need for a plate and with a cleaned spoon her eagerness soon finished the lot.

The water boiled. After knocking out the spiders, Lola filled the chipped basin from the washstand. She stripped to her waist and washed where she could. Ignoring her cuts, old scars and healing wounds, she removed all of her clothes and wiped between her legs and all the way to her feet. Drying in the air didn't take long and she rummaged through the trunk for something plain and suitable for her new life and the chores she had to do. Her red day dress was almost black with soot, dust and travel. She would tackle cleaning it later.

The yellow dress with the high laced collar and the plainest material was the choice she made. It covered the wound completely and she found the new chemise she'd been saving. Her hair needed brushed and she took to it with gusto. The ringlets were banished to create a fullness her hair didn't hold naturally. She tied it all back and away in a large handkerchief with a bow at the top of her forehead.

Despite the sore arm, in an hour she'd made the one room habitable. She brushed, washed, dusted and removed almost all dirt. The only thing remaining was the old cupboard that she hadn't dare touch in case it fell upon her. The oil lamp looked like it might work if it was filled and had a new wick. Jack had brought back Mrs Beatty's box of bits and bobs and it held nothing of value. Lola placed the little trinkets on the mantel where she felt they might have sat.

There was the little carved wooden dog that Lola had given her from the market near the Moulin Rouge. Wiping it with the cloth, it shone like new and Lola kissed it and placed it high up alongside the picture frame that held a strip of dried heather. There were five plates, three cups and saucers and some very battered forks and spoons for the dresser. Nothing matched or looked in any way pretty, but Lola put them in pride of place as if they were treasures.

The morning was bright and the air clear as Lola opened the door. The wood creaked and moaned and the hinges crumbled rust. The path to the shore beckoned and ignoring the aches in her bones she put a spring in her step. She vomited again into the brambles at the far gable and blamed her vigorous activity. The flagstones near

the house gave way to a long and winding track of dirt and then became compacted sand. Then it divided in two, one leading to the rocks and the other to the dunes. Jagged grasses swayed but weren't too dense or thick. With a few strong strides she was down the other side and onto the flat stretch of shale and soft sand. Seaweed littered the damp patches and rock pools were shallow but shone in the sunlight. The breeze was chilly and Lola hugged her shoulders as she swung to see the horizon and then the hills of the Isle of Sands.

'It is beautiful here, Mrs B,' Lola said, spying sheep on the far hillocks and a plume of smoke from someone's chimney. She watched it twirl for a time and then turned to the waves and saw that the Fair Lass was no longer at anchor. Jack and the men were gone. It was then that she saw the bobbing head in the surf. It was either a human head or a seal. She squinted and held a hand to her forehead – a male and a strong swimmer. A hand waved and she returned the gesture. The head came towards the shore and the hand waved again. Lola heard muffled shouts. It was definitely a man and he was cross.

'Good morning, Your Lordship,' Lola called and waved again, knowing full well that the man wanted her to leave the beach. 'What a lovely morning,'

The head took to rising from the incoming tide and showed a fine bare chest, naked groin and striding thighs. Lola giggled as the man marched forwards. Her eyes tried to maintain decorum but it was hard to ignore the very large appendage swinging as he walked closer. A blustery wind made Lola shiver and the cross words got louder. 'Leave, woman! You shouldn't be here.'

He didn't try to shield his modesty. Lola was frozen to the spot for she'd never been in this particular predicament before. There had been naked men (in various guises) but none that were quite so wet from the sea. The man stormed forward, shaking the residual water from his hair and thrusting hands through it as he pulled the long strands at the base of his neck and rung the water down the length of his chiselled chest.

'Haven't you seen a man without his clothes before?' he asked and finally cupped his manhood over as best he could. 'What are you doing on the Sands?'

'I came with–'

'Jack Fitzgerald,' he said.



‘Yes.’

‘I swim every morning and I don’t want an audience,’ he said.

Lola laughed. ‘You’re lying. Of course you want one. And now you have me. And I’m enjoying the view. Thank you.’

The man’s eyes widened. Then his lips curled up at the end. His beard was full and black like his slick, long hair and when he smiled he had handsome dimples. ‘You are here alone?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

‘What brings a well-spoken English woman to the shores of the Sands? Alone?’ he asked.

‘I am Lola de Lacy,’ she said and made a slight curtsy. ‘You must be the Lord of the Sands?’

‘Nothing shocks you. Not even a blush,’ he said, extending one of his cold hands. He took Lola’s fingers and kissed the back of them. ‘Yes, I am Mortimer. Lord of the Sands. You’re a lady who has seen the world and lives to tell the tale.’

Lola nodded and looked again at his nakedness. She was unashamed by her past and of the present. ‘Life is for living, sir,’ she said.

‘You do know that there are no women here? I mean none at all,’ he said, unhindered by his lack of clothes, ‘But wait... you must be Mrs Beatty’s Lola?’ He looked animated, interested and pleased. ‘Of course! Mrs de Lacy. I wrote to you many months ago.’

Lola shivered as the wind was gathering. ‘Perhaps I should let you get dressed?’ she said. ‘You will catch your death.’

‘I’ll go and see you again, my dear lady,’ he said in a sudden hurried manner.

‘I’d be delighted.’

‘Goodbye.’ The Lord of the Sands nodded his head formally and Lola stared while his nakedness walked away over the dunes. She had never had an introduction quite like it. The Fitzgeralds were correct, the Lord of the Sands was unusual.

Mrs Beatty would have spied on him morning after morning. What a way to start the day! Lola liked the Isle of Sands more and more. Before returning to the cottage, Lola foraged in the filling rock pools and found a selection of edible seaweeds and molluscs for later. She made a carrying scoop from her dress tails and picked her way homewards just as the first rain of the morning fell from the greying skies.

Wandering barefoot up the path, she spied the coat of a man

sitting by the ruck of dried peat she'd been using for the fire. The man was sullen but smiled crookedly when she came towards him. He stood and said, 'Hullo. My name is Ivan. They call me the schoolmaster. I wanted to welcome you properly to the island.'

Lola's blood ran cold. He held forward a bottle in a wizened hand. There was something terrible lurking behind this man's blue eyes. Lola shuddered, taking his gift with a muttered thanks. He sniffed the air when he followed her inside and peered around like he might catch a disease. Lola was glad when he said, 'I cannot stay long but I brought you some poteen. We all used to have our own stills for making it on the island. Mine is the best you'll get although you needn't tell Lord Rockford that we use it for all ailments and to warm us on cold nights. I hope that we might share a glass of it some evening.'

'Perhaps,' Lola said as he made his way to the door. 'Thank you for calling.'

The cottage fire had the place cosy but she was chilled. She thanked him and closed the door immediately when he moved away. Leaning against the wood, she searched her memories from Mrs Beatty's tales. There had been no mention of any of these men, and definitely no mention of the mermaid's curse or such a man as the schoolmaster.

Lola waited for many minutes but she was still shaking when she used the log for a seat outside. She tried to settle herself as she watched the daffodils yellow bells swaying in the breeze. The space around the cottage was not too overgrown and there was a small outhouse. Its roof didn't leak too much and could be fixed. She might keep a cow or goat. She would manage that and they'd give her milk. If she could get them over on the boat. It had been a long time since she'd lived so meagrely and this time she was very much alone. The wound high on her chest was infected and with her injuries, Lola could not overpower anyone. The schoolmaster was elderly and frail. He wasn't capable of harming her – but then men surprised her in that regard before. He had no reason to hurt her but she wouldn't let him inside her home again.

Tiredness overtook Lola when she was in the high grass next to the cottage. She had taken off for an exploring walk when the day had opened up and the sunshine was warming the day. But the small, flat banking near the tiny stream looked like a bed of grass meant for a sleepy head, so she sat and then laid down and drifted

off as the bees buzzed around her.

A noise woke Lola. She lay and listened again but heard nothing. How long had she slept? Her hip felt damp from the grass and the pressure of her sleeping body. She needed to move as she couldn't afford to get sick so far from civilisation. She needed to get better, and she should remember that she was still a patient. She felt her sore ribs and peeked at her wound dressings as best she could. The flora around her when gathered and worked with, would help. Lola had learned from women all across Europe.

The trunk when she returned was still locked but Lola saw that someone had moved it a few inches. The dust around it showed it was moved. She had not managed to clean close to it before and she was almost glad of her bad housekeeping. Someone had been in her home without her permission and had wanted to see inside her luggage.

It wasn't the Lord of the Sands. A man like him would not have an interest in her things. The schoolmaster was more the type to poke into her belongings. Lola checked around but nothing she had left out was missing. Not even Ivan the schoolmaster's bottle of foul-smelling alcohol was touched. Everything else was where it should be. The ribbon around her neck held the key to the lock for the trunk and thankfully she had taken it with her. She opened the trunk in a whirr of worry but nothing seemed to be touched. She closed it with a bang and locked it quickly before she worried herself sick.

She had yet to meet Seanín Childs the light-keeper. Mrs Beatty mentioned Seanín in her letter; he had met and wed a woman but the young bride stayed on the mainland. That had been odd to Lola, but with the curse it now made sense. Until the bride conceived, she possibly wouldn't set foot on the Isle of Sands. Lola touched her own belly. Being childless had its blessings but also brought excruciating pain.

It wasn't likely that a light-keeper would come into her home. His job was trustworthy. She noted that the air wasn't scented differently so the visit was brief.

Fear didn't lodge for long with Lola. If she had felt more able, she would have taken off on a trek to investigate the whole island and she would know where the best plants could be found, but for now her side and arm ached so, instead, she hobbled while carrying fuel for the fading fire.

# Chapter 6

The day was long and Jack could smell the lady's scent for almost all of it. The aroma had kidnapped him.

Even his father, Patrick admitted, 'I can think of nothing but that raven-haired princess,' he said. They had come in out of the rain into the family homestead on the outskirts of Rockford village. The bread was stale but the butter was thick and creamy. Patrick blessed himself and Michael nodded agreement. 'I think I'm more fatherly in my thoughts, though, son,' Patrick joked at Jack who said nothing.

Michael had spent far too long gathering the things from the woman's list. He crossed off each item like it was a quest. Each stroke bringing a satisfied sigh and proud expression to his young face. The Fitzgeralds had good credit everywhere but the fabric and the paper, quill and ink were causing interest in the various places they had to go. The eggs, flour and salt were packed in with the turnips and potatoes. This famine was building again according to the newspapers, but so far those with coins were surviving well. Jack ignored the questions from curious locals and elbowed Michael to do the same.

'They all saw her on the pier,' Michael explained, 'and all know she's on the Sands. Those working at the Big House say she was there for a few days, but then Her Ladyship came home and ran her off. Her reputation is in tatters. Lola de Lacy is the talk of the country!'

'She doesn't care,' Patrick said and clicked at the mare to move the cart. 'She's a sassy wench and make no mistake about it. A fine lassie though, but tough as nails.'

Jack agreed with his father and they rarely had words. He was the captain on the water and out at the Sands, while on dry land his father was still in charge. Jack remained silent.

'You're fierce quiet about her?' Patrick said, looking skywards to see if they'd make it home before the rain. 'Are you going to mention your lust at all?'

Jack shrugged.

‘It’s bad so,’ Patrick said. ‘I can understand the passion, lad. There aren’t many beauties in these parts and she’s got a steady nerve on her and she would turn any man’s eye. There’s a lot to admire. And you have to remember that you’ve never been in love before.’

‘Love!’ Jack scoffed but the gut twisted inside him. ‘I’m not that stupid! Love – Ha!’ Jack was lying and they all knew it. ‘The Lord of the Sands will have found her by now.’ The sigh from Jack was loud and long. ‘She’ll have more in common with the likes of him.’

Michael grimaced. ‘And the knob on him too. They say women like them big like his. Is that true, Pat?’

Patrick guffawed loudly and Jack chuckled.

‘Mine’s not small but it ain’t that big,’ Michael admitted, scratching his inner thigh. ‘And I’d not be showing it to the whole country – not like him.’

‘There’ll be none of that bad chat,’ Patrick said. ‘It makes no difference of its size, Michael. It’s how you use it. A thin worm is as good for fishing as a thick one.’

‘Even better,’ Michael replied, all pleased with himself. ‘That’s true enough.’

‘We can go back to Mrs de Lacy tomorrow,’ Patrick said. ‘There’s no shame on checking on her a day early. I think she’s hurting worse than she let on. She had a weak arm too. We can move those few sheep tomorrow morning and bring the supplies back to the Sands.’

Jack’s mood lifted. He could see Lola’s dark hair and eyes. He tried not to look too excited at the prospect of seeing her again. ‘Perhaps,’ he said, not looking at his comrades, ‘we could take her a chair and bring some tools and fix things up a bit like we used to for Mrs B.’

‘I wonder how she knew old Mrs Beatty?’ Michael asked. ‘Surely a servant wouldn’t have to leave a hovel on an island to a lady like Mrs de Lacy? It’s not right. I heard a thing or two in the village.’

‘Oh?’ Jack asked, then held his breath.

‘Talk in the pub is that she’s a fine courtesan from the English and French courts,’ Michael whispered. ‘She’s famous. Known as the Temptress. A siren who seduces men and takes their souls.’

Jack sat taller in the back of the cart and wanted to ask what that meant but the rain started and they set to covering some of the more perishable items like the salt and the flour sacks.

Concentrating on anything was damn nigh impossible. The raven-haired woman was in his arms, against him like she was in the boat. His chest thumped and he knew he would need to get sense from somewhere. There were going to be many a man wanting to lie with Lola de Lacy.

Jack had very little to offer her. Youth and ambition would have to be enough. Jack thumped the tools into the wooden box they would take to the dronthein boat. Michael was too young and not a threat to him as Lola's suitor. At least that was something. But Jack could count many men in the village who might attempt to seduce a foreign beauty.

The fact that Lola was on the Sands was fortunate. The mainland men thought that the island was cursed and few ventured out there. And if Lola came ashore, Jack would accompany her – for protection. The men on the island were all odd creatures with dark pasts or hermit-like notions. There was no massive threat to Jack – apart from the Lord of the Sands. He was always an adversary. Mr Childs had a wife and Ivan the schoolmaster was ugly as sin and crippled with the drink. Jack's seduction plans might be safe enough, if Lola stayed on the Isle of Sands. The scythe cut through the brambles in the hedgerow and Jack worked off his annoyance for an hour despite the pelting rain.

In the evening, with the potatoes piping hot, the men prayed thanks over their meal and asked their god for health, wealth and more good food. Jack also asked silently for guidance about the lady he left on The Sands. The meal was quiet apart from the chomping and slurping. It was different entirely from the previous evening. Patrick belched and tossed his plate towards Michael. It was a sign that he was finished and needed a servant to clear up the table. Michael never complained.

Their one pig would like the skins from their meal. The hens would peck for scraps, too, until Michael closed them in for the night. When they were on the Sands, their neighbour looked in and did any necessary jobs. Sometimes, he called in for a dram or two when the men were about and usually Jack was content and satisfied at this time when things were winding down. It was the best time of the day, when he was certain of his life's purpose.

Now all that was before him was the de Lacy lady's smile, her elegant neck, the curve of her bosom barely visible in that tight, corseted dress. Then she'd fall back into his arms on the boat. Over

and over again he smelt her hair, felt her rest on him. He dreamed about what it would feel like to hold her fully in his arms when she wanted to be there. She would be soft and delicious.

His hackles rose as she'd probably been in the Lord of the Sands's abode already. He would have found her out by now and welcomed her into that fancy place of his. The Fitzgeralds had never set foot over the threshold of the folly he lived in, but they had peeked in when they knew he was elsewhere. It was one main room and was much too colourful to be a real man's place. The drapes were expensive and the furniture fancy. Michael and himself had mocked the tinkling of the things he hung from everywhere and the scent of spices and bright womanly colours and fabrics. Large canvases littered the floor and some large chairs. The place was dishevelled and cluttered with books, papers, bottles and ornaments. What type of man lived like that? And how did he pass each day when he did not toil and work?

The Lord of the Sands would have all the time in the world to seduce Lola. Jack thumped his hand on the table and stared into the fire. He would need to return and find out what was happening. His heart couldn't stand Lola forgetting him and becoming involved with someone else. Jack was damned if he was going to lose her to the fancy dresser and naked swimmer.

'We're going to sort those sheep tomorrow morning!' Jack said to his father who puffed on his night-time pipe and nodded his agreement. 'And then we'll take Mrs de Lacy the supplies,' Jack added. 'She'll be in need of them. We can check if she is safe.'

Michael washed on at the plates and Patrick got up and put more fuel on the fire.

'What did they say in the pub?' Jack asked. 'Tell me that again. What is a courtesan?'

'A whore for the king and his men,' Michael said without hesitating. 'They are ladies like that who live in palaces and the like.'

Jack's mouth fell open. 'A whore?' he asked, looking at his father for guidance. 'For kings and noblemen? I cannot believe that!'

'It's true,' Michael said. 'The gossip is that she was in Rockford's bed when his wife came home. And she's a long way from England and France. Do you think she is one of those women though? She seemed more normal to me. And if she is one of them, what's she

doing here? She might be a *temptress*. That's a good word. Aren't you tempted by her, Jack?

Patrick moved an eyebrow high and stared at his son.

Jack held his chest. 'A harlot? I cannot believe that,' he breathed out in despair. 'She did say that Lady Rockford was her reason for leaving the Big House. What the hell made her come to find Mrs Beatty?'

Pulling off his boots, Patrick balanced his pipe between his lips and thoughtfully said, 'She's in danger. She was sick on the boat, but it wasn't sea-sickness. It was fear. She was frightened by what she was leaving behind. She was very sad when she heard about Mrs Beatty. She looked to be in pain until we got to the cottage. It settled her. A woman used to palaces couldn't stay in Beatty's hovel.'

Jack agreed with a few grunts and said, 'She's used to taking care of herself. Women in palaces have servants.'

'They said she entertained the king and his consorts for years in foreign lands. They said it would be no time at all until she was summoned back to where she came from. Or that men would come looking for her. It seems women like that are dangerous. She didn't look dangerous to me.'

'The church and men in power all think women are dangerous. The priest always preached about "the mercy of Rockford only having a few good Christian women, who took care of their men and the faith of the parish". It wouldn't take the priest long to hear of the whore living on the Sands,' Patrick said.

'We might not make it back to the Sands tomorrow after all,' Jack said. 'There's too much work on to be galavanting over and back to that island on the whims of a woman.'

Patrick puffed on his pipe and Michael went to shut in the animals. It was many minutes before Patrick spoke. 'Jack, you shouldn't listen to gossip. Whatever her reason for being here, and whatever her past, Mrs de Lacy is a woman on her own and she is in need of friendship as much as you are in need of female company. I wouldn't let the likes of those drunkards have a say in my life. Would you?' The smell of Patrick's socks rose as he took them off to dry nearer the fire. 'Did you hear me now, son?' he asked.

'I hear ya,' Jack replied. 'I was thinking of the work we have to do.'



‘You’re as much a sinner as she is,’ Patrick replied. ‘She’s had to use all her cunning to survive and we’re no different.’

The Fitzgeralds might have done many an evil deed but they never sold themselves or the women they did have. Jack was about to say as much when Michael returned.

‘After you own mother, I think Lola de Lacy is the finest woman I’ve ever met,’ Patrick announced to them all while lighting his pipe again. ‘I think she is a special lady. I won’t listen to any gossip or bad talk. I aim to go back and see that she is safe on The Sands tomorrow whether the two of you come with me, or not.’

Michael grinned and said, ‘You better charge her for the supplies, though, Jack. We owe money all over the place.’

Jack didn’t speak but looked into the fire. His glorious Lola was slightly tainted now.

‘You could ask her about how she made those coins she left on the table?’ Michael said. ‘We could ask her if she’s a courtesan.’

‘Indeed we will not!’ Jack said, for he would hate to take them from her if he knew exactly how she earned them. ‘We’ll drop it all off and not even go ashore.’

As Jack got into his bed, he wished that his spirit could leave and lie with Lola de Lacy.

# Chapter 7

From the bowl on the table Lola took some collected feverfew and fennel that she had found on her short walk. She boiled a healing broth for she felt even worse than the day before. She was weaker and would need more water and that meant returning to the stream. Lola ran a hand over the pistol on the table. Carrying water and a weapon didn't suit a woman and especially not one who felt this shaky. Lola looked for ribbon to tie the protection under her petticoats.

While the medicinal drink bubbled gently she closed her eyes and saw Mrs Beatty's smile, felt her father's hand on her hair, smelled the smoke and ale from the bawdy dance halls, saw the glint of jewels in candlelight, inhaled the scent of Madame du Gare's perfume and heard the music.

Lola had cared for most of her men. There had been others who Lola chose to forget. There wasn't much to take her mind off the present. Her precious books were left behind. If she did needlework it might now pass the time but the pace of life Lola was used to was gone. Passionate love and conversations with powerful people in villas and palaces across the capitals of the known world wasn't quite the same as a lowly, dwindling fire that she had to stoke herself.

Lola cried. Not for her situation but for what was now gone, never to return again. It wasn't often that she let the tears flow. Her body was fevered and she wasn't well.

'Let it all out,' Mrs Beatty would encourage but no matter what pain was inflicted on Lola over her three decades on the earth, she remained strong of spirit. It came from her mother's people. The ones who disowned her three times. Like Peter disowned his Lord and master, Lola was denied by her people – repeatedly. Yet, she had been firm in who she was.

'My own niece is unbending, shocking and contemptuous,' her uncle said from his pulpit for all to hear.

Changing her name had been necessary for Lola – for many reasons. There would be no scandalous connection between her and

her family in Sligo.

Lola smiled and twirled around the floor. She held the embrace and attention of Mrs Beatty and as she grew the admiration of many past suitors in turn. Each was different; interesting and endearing men. Some were gentle, some brutish, all enchanted by her. Most were fulfilling dalliances. Lola took a bow and began her trance again, crying on each fading applause. The earthen floor was not like the marble or smooth wood but she had not lost her joy of movement. The wound hurt badly all of a sudden and she stopped to lean on the edge of the table and let the music ebb away. It was time to forget the frivolities that had almost killed her. It was time for change. Yet, if she spun and swung her dress higher and sang one more song what harm could it do? But, the naughty words stuck in her throat and a sob sucked the happiness away. Dust rose as she flopped to the ground. A long animal sound rang in her ears. It had been from her. Lola cried loud and long for the first time in her entire life. It only ended from exhaustion.

There was a quiet knock on the door and the top half of it moved inwards and a face was there. It was Jack Fitzgerald's crinkled forehead and his straight moustache unmoving. He pushed the cap back on his head and stared at her pain. Lola pawed at her tear-stained face. Weak, she turned away and rose off the floor. She fixed her dress, hair and dabbed at her cheeks.

They had all heard her. She was exposed.

Lola screamed and screamed until strong hands took hold of her arms and a voice asked her, 'Are you hurt? Look at me, my lady. Look at me.'

Commands were not often obeyed but Lola opened her eyes.

'Are you injured?' Jack asked.

'No,' she whispered yet she was hurting everywhere and her fever was high. He let go of her slightly but rightly didn't move away as she might have fallen again. 'Not physically injured. No.' Lola's shoulders sank and she lowered her gaze. Jack moved one hand and held it to her forehead until it fell onto his shoulder and chest.

This man was warm and safe. Again, she was back in his embrace. Lola clung to his clothes and dug a grip into his strong arms, then his broad back. She cried without control. He let her and said nothing. When she drew breath, Jack asked, 'May I carry you to the bed? You need to rest now.'

She nodded against his thumping heart and with one solid lift she was carried the few steps to the bed. He laid her down and placed a pillow of her rolled-up cloak under her head and draped the blanket over her. Snuggly, she shuddered out a sigh. A hand touched her hair, then rubbed across her eyes to close them. ‘Whist now a ghrá’ a voice said. ‘Whist. Sleep.’

Lola did as he said.

It was dark and cosy where she went, until the gunshots rang out and she was trapped all over again. The man and his music was so beautiful. Even more beautiful in dreams. Always, she listened to the piano and he hit her and then took over and over. His music always played. Always. She called out for Edmund as the memories collided and mixed. Then there was nothing else, only the loneliness and now even Mrs Beatty’s beating heart stopped. Worms crawled from her eye sockets and mouth as she was lowered down.

Lola woke. There was a presence on the mattress. It was sitting watching. It held her hand and spoke. ‘You are safe.’

That was all she needed to hear. Sleep took Lola once more and she let it.

## Chapter 8

When she looked up at him, Jack held her hand in his and promised her that she was safe. Even if Jack was drowning, Lola was not. He would protect her, they all would look after her.

‘What the devil happened?’ Patrick asked, peering over the blanket to see the pain etched on the prettiest face. ‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph,’ he gasped and pointed at the white porcelain skin which was scarred pink with a patterned burn – like a seal on a letter. Jack moved the material a little and there was the start of a larger scar, a deep cut now healed over into a ridge. It was not fully visible and the sleeve was buttoned tightly.

‘She thought she was alone, and she was howling, crying,’ Jack whispered. ‘I told you this island is cursed. It’s no place for her.’

Michael stared and there were tears in his big blue eyes. Jack couldn’t mock them, for he felt like crying himself.

Patrick walked backwards and suggested, ‘Let her sleep. We can build a better fire and get her something to eat.’

Jack didn’t reply or move.

‘Stay you there then. Don’t waken her. She’s got medicine in the pot. She is hurt in ways we cannot see,’ Patrick said and elbowed a staring Michael, and then dragged the lad to follow him.

Jack was alone with the breathing, beautiful breasts. He mirrored each intake of breath. It was a sound sleep and then his gaze fell on the pistol under the mattress. She had been serious about being armed. If he moved it, she might sense its departure. He let it be and rose quietly despite the creaking bed.

There was space to lie beside her. Might he do that? But perhaps he had better not. Jack looked towards the door.

The fire needed stoking and he poked it quietly. How long might she sleep? If truth be told they had all day to spend on the Sands, but would the others agree to lingering here waiting on her to waken?

The powerful woman he saw yesterday was gone today. He would wait for that other strong and healthy woman to return. Harlot or not, this person on the bed was a human being that

needed protecting. For almost half an hour he stayed looking quietly into the fire, sorting his thoughts.

Patrick whispered and touched his shoulder and said, 'She needs us to stay the night. We'll sort things.'

Jack shrugged.

'You shouldn't have witnessed that. She'll be embarrassed and cross.'

Jack's eyes squinted in disagreement. 'That's not true. She needed help, she will be grateful.'

'She thought she was alone,' Patrick whispered. 'You said it yourself. She was not expecting us to see her pain. She may resent you seeing it. Resent us all. I know you'll not want to hear this – but you might have lost her.'

Jack tightened his jaws together and looked back towards the bed. He had just found this woman and was just starting to sort out where he might fit into her world.

'Just be careful,' Patrick said and he rummaged in his pocket for his pipe. He sucked on it to light it. 'I sent Michael back to the boat in case *The Fair Lass* was no longer beached and all of the stores were washed away. I've brought most of the things up the path. But, I could do with a hand.'

Jack stepped closer to the bed and looked. 'No,' he said. 'You can manage. I want to be here if she wakes up. What was in the pot? Do you think it made her a little deranged?'

Patrick shook his beard. 'This is not something simple, son. This is not your average woman. The pot's contents are harmless and are used for healing. She's come here to recover. That poor lass has been through a great deal. Lord knows what. Remember that you cannot expect much from the broken hull of a sunken boat.'

'I feel Mrs B here all the time. Can you?' Jack asked. 'She's urging me to take care of this woman. I almost heard that darling voice of hers.'

'You've been at the mushrooms again then?' Patrick joked. 'Hearing dead people isn't normal.'

'Don't mock!' Jack said. 'Just don't.' He looked out the door and into the grass growing tall from the old chamber pot outside.

'What happened to you worrying about her bad reputation?' Patrick whispered, checking on the sleeping body. 'You weren't for coming ashore at all and now you're all set for caring about her today. You cannot be fickle in this. If you become a crutch for the

poor creature you cannot just wrench it away when you feel like it.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Jack said, spitting as he spoke.

Lola moved on the bed and rolled over. Neither man moved.

'It's not your fault that you've lived many years without good female company,' Patrick whispered. 'It's not her fault that you're a desperate fool.'

'Speak you for yourself!' Jack said. 'She's like a mermaid. Calling us all to our doom.'

Patrick's pipe billowed smoke and it took him many seconds to reply. 'Do you believe that? Really?'

Jack ran his hands through his dark-brown hair. 'I don't know what to think,' he admitted while thrusting out his hand looking for a handshake. 'Let us agree not to argue about her anyhow? There's no point in us falling out.'

'Agreed. There'll be no more arguments.'

They shook hands on it. There had been very few cross words between Jack and his father over the years. Jack listened to reason and authority and when tension had arisen they arranged compromises.

'This might be your chance at happiness, son. But looking about this woman's happiness is going to be more than a quick poke with a whore.'

Jack nodded.

Michael came in quietly and sat on the stool with the wonky leg. It rattled but the sleeping woman stayed still. 'I'm exhausted,' Michael said, wiping sweat from his face and top lip. 'Is there something to drink?'

Jack lifted the bottle of poteen and looked at it. 'The schoolmaster was here.' He uncorked the tall green bottle with his teeth and sniffed the contents. 'Good stuff it is too. But you're not for drinking that, Michael. Go to the stream and bring us all back a bucket of fresh cold water.' Jack was being harsh with the boy, for he had worked hard at the sheep all morning, had a tight sail over and was to and fro from the boat with the supplies.

Michael got off the stool quickly and it fell over. Lola leapt upright and searched rapidly for the pistol. Finding it, she cocked it in two fluid movements and shouted, 'Stop or I'll shoot.'

Michael nearly jumped out of his skin, Patrick dropped his pipe from an open mouth and Jack held his hands aloft. 'Don't shoot,' Jack said. 'It's us.'

It took Lola a worrying few seconds to ascertain where she was. She shook her head and stared.

‘You’re on the Sands,’ Michael said slowly, rising his hands also. ‘Remember?’

Lola lowered the pistol and clutched at her shoulder and arm. Jack went to take the weapon from her. Without a word she gave it up. Jack’s fingertips touched off her skin but she didn’t seem to notice. She held the bridge of her nose tightly and said, ‘Sorry. I feel terrible. I’m shivering, but boiling up.’

Jack placed a hand on her forehead. She was perspiring and clammy. Her eyes had dark circles and she was exceptionally pale.

‘I was trying to heal myself with the contents of the pot. Could you heat it and give it to me, please?’ she asked.

‘Of course.’ Jack nodded to his father and said, ‘We’ve brought everything on the list and we’ll stay tonight as you don’t look good.’

Lola didn’t object. He thought she might. She lay down again and closed her eyes. She was exhausted and trembling. Things did not look good.

‘I don’t know what helps a sick woman. What might be ailing you?’ Jack asked. ‘Does it feel serious?’

‘The cut on my collarbone is inflamed. I will need to make a poultice. I returned a few months ago from abroad as I was avoiding fevers elsewhere. I fear it’s bad. I’ve never felt this awful so quickly,’ Lola said softly. ‘Lady Rockford is just back from France and had an illness. Perhaps it is that.’ Lola stopped to take a long breath. ‘I thought I was safe enough coming to a deserted island. I only saw Her Ladyship briefly. You should leave me here. I don’t want you all getting this too.’

Jack’s heart missed a beat. They had heard that very morning that Lady Rockford was near death. Jack hadn’t given it much thought as he himself had only seen the woman from a distance and he had no great love of the English.

Patrick stood solid by the fire and said in Irish, ‘It’s the sweat of death. She might die.’

Jack couldn’t let those words in. He shook his head as Lola drifted off into another slumber. Life had suddenly taken such a sinister turn. The stranger had vomited yesterday and been weak but she’d obviously cleaned up the cottage and eaten. She looked healthy enough when they left her last night? Perhaps the illness that took Mrs B wasn’t all away? They’d left this poor woman alone



and now she might die. Jack couldn't breathe. He shuffled to the door. Mrs Beatty's voice was ringing in his ears. *'Care for my precious one, Jack Fitzgerald. Don't abandon her like every other man she's ever known. Save my Lola.'*

Jack stood gazing out on the wilds of the Atlantic and on the *Fair Lass*. They could easily sail away and hope the danger didn't follow them. A sensible man wouldn't risk his own life and the lives of his clan. He leaned, hands on his knees and tried to think.

*'Save my Lola. Save my Lola,'* came to him on the breeze.

Returning to the cottage, Jack said, 'Take Michael with you. Go to the village and bring back the healer or doctor. I'll stay. Don't come back up here to the cottage though. I'll see to her. Go now!'

'You're a good man, Jack Fitzgerald.' His father clapped his back. 'We'll be back first thing in the morning.'

## Chapter 9

The weakness was terrible. Lola could barely help the gentleman undress her. In her undergarments she lay back on the damp mattress and took the best breaths she could. Her heart was pumping heavily. It might burst from her chest. The poultice of stale bread, warm milk and salt was easing the soreness of the cut Lady Rockford inflicted. But Lola hadn't the energy to hide her other marks, injuries or scars. If this man Jack saw them what might he think? She didn't care anymore.

He took the ribbon and key from around her neck and Lola let him. She helped by gently lifting her head and pointing to the trunk. She said, 'There is laudanum and a clean chemise in there.'

His eyes were fearful and his large moustache tickled her neck when he helped her out of her loose chemise. Naked Lola felt free and cooler. He covered her modesty with the blanket and she thanked him. She slept again for a time and heard him out of the corner of her consciousness rummaging in her belongings. What would he think of the contents? The rich clothes, the weaponry, brandy, wine, lotions and potions and her stash of fine jewels. If he was a thief she would be ruined.

'I am here, Mrs de Lacy,' he whispered near her ear. 'Don't be afraid.'

Lola was rarely scared but she had no power in her limbs, she had nothing in her arsenal to care for herself.

'Thank you,' she said with a dry mouth and reached out for her nurse. It wasn't Mrs Beatty's hand which took her own but it was firm and comforting nonetheless. 'I'll be forever in your debt,' she said.

Darkness came. Lola was lost. She couldn't see, hear or move. Where was she? For a long spell she wanted to scream about her entrapment but no words came. Exhausted, she gave in to the nightmares.

A flapping British flag and her uncle's warning. 'Leave with this unsuitable officer and you need never return. You've always been headstrong and you will bring ruin to yourself and this family.'

Eloping indeed!’

‘Marry me?’ he said and convinced a sixteen-year-old Lola to join him on a tall ship with impressive sails. The sea was thrilling for the young bride. Her hair and old life were blowing away. ‘Life is ours, Elizabeth. Ours, my darling.’

The time was so short and his body was wrecked with canon fire. He never returned and yet she wasn’t sad, for fear overtook all else. Music came and made her dance. The men liked her ankles and how her breasts moved in flimsy dresses. She, Lizzie Chambers, beamed back at herself in the mirror. The stench of dance halls, the tinkle of coin and the grasp of hands on skin. More greyness.

Men were vicious and Lola had run fast and far. Then, there came from the mists a gentle Count and dancing in circles around Austrian gardens. The nights, the sparkling diamonds, his need of her, his lecherous son and the sound of the shot. Lola needed no one. The shameful cancan, the jiggling breasts, the smell of cigars.

Lola finally woke in Mrs Beatty’s bed in a pool of sweat. The handsome Fitzgerald man was hovering, mopping at her brow. ‘Whist now a ghrá. They’ve gone for help.’

‘A ghrá’ – his love. Lola smiled.

When the sleep lifted again, there were loud shouts and people arguing. Lord Rockford was blurry but it was him there holding her hand now and crying. Lola smiled. His bald head shone in the firelight and his beard was greyer than she remembered. Blue eyes let tears fall and she reached out to him. ‘Fredrick?’ she said. ‘You’re here? You’re here on The Sands.’

‘I am Lola. I am. I’ve brought my trusted physician and we aren’t leaving until you improve. No matter what these louts say. We’ll save you, my love.’ He touched Lola’s cheek and leaned in to kiss her lips. ‘Do you hear me? I care for you. Now and forever. Live for me. I cannot let you go.’

Lola sighed. ‘I’ll try.’

‘Let me examine the woman. Your wife has just died, my lord, this is most inappropriate. Move out of my way,’ a voice said and there was a shuffling of feet and the pressure on the bed left as Lola lifted a weak hand and searched for Fredrick. All she got was his voice. ‘I am here, Lola. Let the doctor help you.’

‘Yes,’ she managed to reply. ‘Don’t go?’

‘Never.’

When his beard woke her again Lola asked, ‘How long have I

been like this?’

‘A day,’ Fredrick said. ‘Don’t move. We’ve you in a clean bed and you are through the worst.’ He kissed Lola full on the lips. It tingled. ‘Thank God you’re going to be all right.’ He breathed heavily and his nose touched hers. ‘I prayed.’

His fingers encircled hers. He was making jokes. He believed in neither heaven or hell.

‘The doctor says it’s not the pox, it is a bad infection from the wound. You’ll be better with rest. But Lola, I have to leave,’ he said slowly. ‘My wife died and I should be at the manor house.’

A tear dribbled down Lola’s cheek. His thumb wiped it away and she let another follow it.

‘I should be there now, but I needed to see that you were going to be all right.’

Lola clenched her eyes closed tighter and took her hands away from him. He was leaving.

‘You know I need to go. Don’t make this hard.’

Lola nodded. She needed water. ‘You promised me,’ she whispered. ‘But, go now. Leave.’

The beard covered her lips again and she wanted to die. Wanted him to disappear. Wanted to hurl an insult and demand he never return.

‘I’ll be back as soon as I can,’ he promised and touched her chin. ‘Look at me. Even in this state you are a beauty. Beautiful Lola.’ He was a handsome man when he smiled.

His cheek was hairy in her palm. ‘Go,’ she said. ‘Just go.’

Lola held the bridge of her nose and listened to his footsteps fade. She found a glass of water sitting on the stool next to the bed. It was gulped down and the exertion exhausted her once more. Someone was standing there. ‘Thank you,’ she murmured, hoping they could hear her. What was his name again? This one didn’t abandon her. ‘Jack,’ she said. ‘Thank you, Jack C Fitzgerald. Don’t go.’

‘You are welcome, Lola de Lacy. I won’t leave.’

When Lola did return to reality, Jack was by her side every time. Sometimes he was understandably sleeping or by the fire, but he was true to his word and always with her. Each time Lola thanked him he said, ‘I’m here. You’re safe, a ghrá.’

The nightmares came and went. Men were requesting her to dance. Her stupidly voicing her opinions of the peasants’ plight. The

need for basic food and shelter didn't seem much to press for. The anger. The fear. The prison and the punishment. Lola screamed and it was the British ambassador who heard and pleaded for her release. The air of Ireland and how good it was to be home. A lord's interest in her scars. His wife's bitterness at her invitation to their bedchamber. The locked doors, the attack, and the slash of the knife.

Mrs Beatty's cottage was bright when Lola sat up. The night terrors slipped away. Jack was burning something on the fire and her water tasted metallic. But she was not alone and she was alive. 'Thank you,' she said when Jack draped another blanket around her shoulders.

'I've made us something,' he said with a grimace. 'And there's no need to thank me until you taste it. I'm glad to see that you are coming back to the land of the living.'

Lola sipped her water and watched him stir the pot and it rose up the smell of burnt food.

'Lord Rockford will have buried Her Ladyship and be back to you soon,' Jack said, not looking at Lola. His tone was disappointed. 'I thought you'd want to know.'

'Thank you,' Lola said.

'His doctor saved your life and I didn't want either of them here. I am sorry but I didn't.'

'It is hard to say no to Fredrick,' Lola said, knowing it was impossible. 'But it was you who saved me.' Lola said it again to make sure he understood. 'It was you who stayed.'

'The lord insisted that I stayed,' Jack said, flopping the spoon into the pot. 'I sent Father and Michael to tell him how you were. I thought he deserved that much. Now I'm regretting it. He'll be back as soon as he can. A man like that does not care about the look of things. His wife is barely cold in the ground and he's...'

Lola sat up in the bed and fixed the pillow behind her.

'Are you hungry?' Jack asked.

'I'm not sure,' Lola admitted, touching her stomach. 'I still don't feel like myself.'

'You cried a lot in your slumber,' Jack said. 'You talked and asked for people.'

'Oh?'

'You've led an interesting life,' Jack said and pointed at Lola's arm. 'There are many scars and marks on your skin.'

‘Ah.’

‘Sometime you might confide in me about them?’ Jack asked.

‘Perhaps.’

‘Lord Rockford wanted to enlighten us about why you were in Donegal. I refused to listen to his sordid tale, but he told us anyway.’

‘You’re a good man, Jack C Fitzgerald.’

‘You don’t know me.’ Jack kicked the stool slightly. ‘I couldn’t believe what he told us.’

‘And what did he say?’ Lola sighed. ‘I’m sure it was the truth. There was no reason for him to lie.’

Jack’s eyes widened and he strode forward. ‘Surely you didn’t come here because he wanted you to be with him and his wife in their bed? Tell me that’s not true.’

Lola’s head hurt, but the reaction of Jack pained her more.

‘Is it the truth?’ he asked again.

‘Lord Rockford needs an heir,’ Lola said. ‘His wife refused to lie with him, since she heard of his dalliances. I’m known for my abilities to help in such matters. So yes, he requested that I came here. However, he thinks he has fallen in love with me while waiting on his wife to come back from France.’

‘She’s being buried as we speak!’ Jack snapped.

‘Ah,’ she said with sorrow. ‘She tried to kill me but it was not all of her fault. Fredrick drove her to the edge of all reason. I am still glad that I came for I’ve always wanted to come to the Isle of Sands. Mrs Beatty asked me to visit and with Fredrick’s invitation I thought I would finally have the means to come to somewhere close by. Stupidly, I agreed to help him. Like I say, things got a little out of hand. His wife was also unwell and not best pleased to see me in Rockford. She cut me and after a few terribly tense hours, where I was locked away and feared for my life, she then had her men cast me out. The lord had to agree to all her demands. I was grateful to have here to come to. Is that what he told you? Did he tell you what she did to me?’

Jack sat on the stool and put his head in his hands.

‘I’m not a bad woman despite what you and others may think. I’ve found a way to survive in this murky world.’

‘Do you love him?’ Jack asked. ‘Will you marry him now?’

Lola stared at the boatman. What a question!

‘Answer me.’

‘Lord Rockford would never marry me! He loves the *thought* of me and half-cares, but he would never marry Lola de Lacy.’

‘He kissed you.’

‘I’m very tired still and I don’t like your tone.’

‘Do you love him?’ Jack asked, lowering his shoulders and voice. ‘Do you want *him*?’

‘No,’ Lola replied and took a drink of her water. Her hand was shaking. ‘But, I don’t see this is any of your business.’

Jack gawped. He seemed to be jealous and that made him look very attractive.

‘How long have you been taking care of me? You must be worried about the cost to you and your time?’ Lola asked. ‘Fredrick or I can pay you for your trouble. I’m very grateful. Like I said, I am forever in your debt.’

‘I don’t want any of his filthy money,’ Jack said. ‘And, I don’t need you to be in my debt.’

With that there was a barking of a dog and Lola saw Lord Rockford’s impressive tall figure stride into the room with a fine red setter at his heels.

‘Lola,’ he said. ‘I’m glad to see that you are better. I got word that you were much improved. I came as soon as I could.’

Lola glanced over the lord’s shoulder and saw Jack storm out the door.

# Chapter 10

Jack nearly knocked his father over on his race from the room. He couldn't stand to watch that man fawn and slobber over Lola again. The waves of Lough Túr seemed to laugh at Jack as he relieved himself against the sand dunes. The wind still managed to blow splashes back onto his boots. Jack cursed. Luckily he was finished as someone was coming. He also rubbed an errant tear away quickly.

'He isn't a man you can refuse,' Patrick said at Jack's elbow. 'I'm sorry, but I had to bring him and his dog back here. Lola is pleased to see His Lordship, though, and she's looking better.'

Jack cursed again and kicked at the tuft of grass.

'He'll not stay long. He wants to leave as soon as possible,' Patrick confirmed. 'Even he is worried about how it looks, that he's here with her again.'

'He'll not be gone soon enough for me!'

'She'll still need a nursemaid. We've asked around but no one will come. Not for any money. Not one woman would hear of it. The rumours are rife. She's being blamed for bringing the pox. Ill will is rising. Even servants of the lord won't come to the Sands. His Lordship has tried to force the issue and made things worse. People are very angry, Jack. Seanín Childs' wife is amongst the most vocal. They're blaming Lola's immorality for the sickness and say she's ruining good men.'

'The light-keepers wife? What's that Childs woman saying now?' Jack said. 'Seanín hasn't even met Lola, never mind that wife of his!'

'She wants Lola removed from here. It's bad. Only consolation is no one will venture out to The Sands at all now. It's considered totally out of bounds to good, god-fearing people.'

'Where's Michael?' Jack asked but looked to the Fair Lass and saw a young head. He waved and the lad waved back.

'As this is a quick visit he stayed aboard. I think even our Michael is starting to believe the rumours. But, I do have some good news. His Lordship offered to build us a small wharf. He doesn't



want to get his feet wet.' Patrick grinned. 'I made a bit of a mess of getting us ashore on purpose.'

Jack laughed. His father was always good at making situations better for the family. 'Then Lord Rockford will be coming back to the Sands?' Jack said with a sniff. 'Despite the talk of curses and the evil temptress, he intends on returning here? And often?'

'Aye.' Patrick opened his own britches for a piss too. 'But we'll finally get a place to moor properly. Think on that.'

Jack scratched at his stubble. 'He'll want Lola though. That will be his reason.' The loathing rose high in Jack's throat. 'And we'll have to bring him here to have her an' all.'

Patrick rubbed his fingers together. 'This is all good for us, Jack! That's good money we're talking about. And she fairly clung to him when he arrived. It won't be a chore for her to see him.'

The sand skiffed upwards when Jack kicked it and the grains floated briefly on the wind. 'She doesn't love him,' Jack said. 'She told me.'

'What has love got to do with money?' Patrick said, fixing his groin. 'Bless us all, Jack, you cannot think you'll get the better of Lord Fredrick Rockford?'

'He'll not marry her,' Jack said. 'I know his wife is dead and all, but he'll not marry Lola. She says he won't.'

Patrick grabbed his arm hard. 'Are you thinking at all, lad? Are you getting the sickness too? Listen to yourself.'

Jack tried to pull free but his father held the sleeve tighter and said, 'She is not a normal woman. We knew that. Much as I hoped for it – she can never be yours now. You've been walking around with your head up your arse for days. Surely you see that she's the lord's mistress? This has got to stop.'

Jack held his hands over his ears. His father's words were harsh and he wasn't listening but he could still hear them and the truth stung. 'You need rest and a proper feed. You cannot leave her yet, but when she's walking about, it will be time for you to leave this place. Then we'll only return here for the stash of guns and brandy. Nothing else. All of this is bringing far too much interest to the Sands and that doesn't suit us one bit. Things need to quieten down and go back to normal. This is not a suggestion. It is a command, son.'

Patrick walked back towards the cottage but the red setter bounded to meet him. It barked loudly and Lord Rockford

commanded it to heel. The dog passed no heed and ran on ahead. The lord put on his hat, nodded at Jack and turned left on the path and strode on down to the rocks with Patrick.

Jack stayed and walked a while on the beach, listening for the call of a mermaid or the signs from the angels or spirits. Who would help him now?



\* \* \*

When Jack finally made his way back to the cottage he watched Lola from the doorway. What a beautiful vision she was! Other men's lips and hands were forgotten as he watched her move. She looked directly at him and Jack stared on. Her eyes looked glad to see him. There was so much said in their glances. Was he imagining their connection? She said something softly and he couldn't hear it. He moved forward.

'Jack,' she said and breathed heavily. 'I was worried that you had...'

'I won't leave. Not yet.'

She sat up shakily and he went to check on the pot.

'I heard that the women of Rockford won't play nursemaid to an evil temptress. They are calling for my blood,' she said. 'And that the Fitzgeralds have been bewitched by me. Jack C Fitzgerald especially has fallen under my spell.'

Jack turned his back on her to tend to the fire and gather his thoughts.

'Lord Rockford talked of me staying here,' she said. 'I hadn't thought that far ahead. It seems that others still know what's best for me. I would need to think of the future, I suppose. I won't be getting any female company here, that's for sure. Not that I want any.'

Jack stirred the pot. 'This will never be edible. I'll cook some of

the fish father left. I can manage that.'

'When will you need to go?' she asked with her brow crinkled in worry.

He should have been prepared for such a question but he wasn't.

'Fredrick Rockford will want passage out here every fortnight or so,' she said. 'If I am to stay here he's promised to build us a jetty. It is so that he can come ashore more easily to visit me.'

'I heard that.' Jack drew his knife from the sheath in his belt. 'You don't need to stay on our account. We managed without the lord's patronage before this and we'll manage after you're gone. I'm going to gut these fish.' The table took a few thumps and slashes from his blade and the three fish were ready in seconds. When he did glance at the bed, the beauty was asleep again. Quietly, he went to gaze upon her and he stood for many minutes. Each feature absorbed time and admiration.

She wouldn't leave.

She couldn't.

He wouldn't let her go.

But, if she stayed...

When she stirred, he did, too, and went back to gather the fish guts for the island's rats and cats. She didn't notice the smell of his cooking and he ate and drank his fill watching her and the fire in equal measure.

When the night came Jack lay on a blanket in front of the fire for the third time, Lola was waiting for him in his dreams. In them, things were wonderful. She danced into his arms and they lay down and he entered her and made them one. They were alone on their island with nothing to burden them both. There was no talk of killing the British, no worry about guns or funds for brandy or whiskey. He never wanted to leave, but then the daylight seeped their joy away.

The bed was empty of her in the morning. The blanket was warm and smelt of her when he lifted it. He should fuss and go out to look but she was possibly relieving herself outside. Jack grew hard thinking of her lifting her clothes. He rekindled the fire easily and then heard the sound of her bare feet as she padded in slowly.

'Jack,' she said. 'It's a beautiful morning.'

'I'm glad to see you're walking about,' Jack said. 'Although, if you're well I'll be told you don't need me anymore.'

'I still feel very weak. Terribly sickly. Awful, in fact.'

‘Good,’ Jack muttered under his breath and heard Lola get back into the covers she’d left. ‘I’ll bring you some bread and hot milk,’ he said.

‘Thank you. Jack, can I ask you something?’

‘Of course.’

‘Are there really not many women about these parts?’ she asked.

‘There are very few.’

‘Is it really the curse?’

‘They say it is.’

‘And now they want to run me out as well?’ Lola asked.

‘You’re no ordinary woman though. And people fear those who are different from themselves,’ Jack replied while heating the milk. ‘But you’re safe on the Sands. No one will come here. It’s out of bounds to the religious folk who want you gone. Here is the safest place for you to be.’

‘Fredrick said the same.’

Jack stopped himself from cursing at the sound of Lord Rockford’s name. Instead, he added, ‘I don’t like him coming here.’

‘I know that.’

‘Tell him to stay away.’ Jack lathered the lard on the bread with temper. ‘Tell him to stay in his fucking big house and leave you be. You don’t need his money or attention. You’ve enough in that trunk to take care of yourself!’

‘For a while,’ Lola admitted. ‘But someone tried to break into it and if I lose my trunk’s treasures then I’ll have nothing. Is it locked? Have you the key?’

‘It is all safe.’ Jack showed her the ribbon was around his own neck. ‘Who tried to open it?’

‘I don’t know. I went for a walk and when I came back I knew someone was tampering with my things.’

‘And you lay with your pistol?’ Jack said, handing her the bread and a cup of milk. ‘Ivan the schoolmaster maybe?’

‘Yes. I thought of him too. He’s an eerie fellow.’

‘And you met the Lord of the Sands?’

‘I did.’ Lola giggled at the memory. ‘Another unusual chap. It wasn’t him. I don’t know why I say that. I just think that it’s not him.’

‘He’s no need of others’ money or possessions. It’s not right to say this but we all know that he’s the bastard son to the lord of Rockford. He was banished here with Ivan to school him. He wants

for nothing other than family, affection and friendship.'

'Fredrick's son? Lord Rockford?' Lola said, her voice giving away her disgust.

'That's the kind of man he is,' Jack said, sitting on the stool. From this angle the sunlight made her chemise translucent and even though he'd seen her ample bosom naked, the material made the sight tantalising. 'Didn't he mention his son was on The Sands then?'

'No. He did say there was something he might need my help with. I'm known as a fixer of problems.'

'I've no great love for Mortimer but it must hurt him that his own father has abandoned him here,' Jack said. 'And that he ignores him for twenty years, but visits his whore almost daily.'

Lola grimaced.

'That was cruel and uncouth,' he added quickly. 'I'm sorry.'

His choice of words didn't make Lola blush. She ate on at her bread.

'Anyhow, before you tackle His Lordship's messes, right now you have problems of your own to fix,' Jack said to appease his previous statement.

'Do I?' Lola said. 'What problems might they be?'

Jack scratched his stubble and rubbed his jaw. 'Making a life for yourself here, the village gossip and His Lordship's visits. To name three.'

Lola knocked a few crumbs from her front and drank a little. 'Are there any more?' she asked.

'Getting better here in this godforsaken place,' Jack replied. 'Shall I go on?'

'None of those sound too bad,' Lola said. 'I've dealt with much worse. I'm alive and the rest is the future. There's no point in worrying about what we cannot control. No one can stop destiny. I do have concerns actually. I'll need to bury or hide most of my precious things. Can you help me?'

'You trust me to do that?' Jack asked.

'I do. If you wanted to rob me you've had ample opportunity and anyhow it's not the type of man you are.'

What kind of man did she think he was? Jack was about to ask her but fear stopped him. What would he do with the likes of this creature taking up every waking thought and all his night-time passions as well? He felt pleasantly trapped. 'I'll help you with that

later today,' he agreed. 'That is one worry. You mentioned concerns? What else is troubling your pretty head?'

'I cannot fathom what you're thinking?' Lola said. 'I usually can guess. It must be the sickness. I'm losing my gift.'

'It's a talent to be able to read minds,' Jack said, laughing. 'And I don't have it either because I wish that I could tell what was in your head.' He took the stopper from the schoolmaster's poteen. He needed alcohol to steady his nerves. 'You want to know me?' he said with a slug of liquid and gave her his cheekiest grin. 'I'm an ordinary hard-working man. A normal buck.'

'I know what *you* are,' Lola said. 'I'm just not sure what you think about me?'

Jack took another swig from the bottle. 'If you know men then I'm no different to any other man, Lola de Lacy. Isn't it obvious what I think of you?'

# Chapter 11

Jack Fitzgerald was different. There he stood – the man Lola de Lacy had searched for. He was at least now wearing a clean shirt. Jack was very different from Lola's usual conquests. He wasn't in a position of power or wealth. He didn't know very many women either.

Jack C Fitzgerald.

Lola smiled despite the tiredness. Jack took another swig from the bottle and hissed with the potency of the alcohol. He was still beautiful.

This was nothing like she'd dreamt it would be. She had never felt so rotten, never felt so weak and sickly, yet, she had also never felt so safe and happy. Even when he stared at her that way and really saw her, Lola was content. He desired her with the stained chemise and messy hair and she was feeling things she had never wanted to. Lola had to break from Jack's gaze. She might cry and Lola de Lacy would not cry again.

'Tell me,' Jack said. 'Where are you from? Why are you not like the others?'

'Others? Do you mean the English?' Lola asked. 'I was born in Sligo.'

'With a name like de Lacy you're Irish?' Jack asked, his eyes curious and sparkling blue. Yes, they were blue. She liked to make sure.

'It's not my real name,' she said. 'Don't ask. Someday I will tell you.'

Jack poured her some poteen into the cup of water in her hands. 'It's medicine,' he said, smiling down at her.

'You're a fisherman,' Lola said. 'Were you born in Rockford?'

'Don't ask,' Jack said with a smile. 'Someday I will tell you.'

Lola lay back on the pillow and chuckled. He was younger than her, but not by much. He had a confident manner for a man with nothing. Lola saw a greatness in him, that he possibly didn't see in himself. That was an attractive modesty. Others saw his potential. His father Patrick obeyed his commands. She had also. That was

unusual. Extremely uncharacteristically, she'd followed his advice and instructions.

Lord Rockford knew of Jack. There was ambition in this striking man – more than the ordinary man carried with him. Lola was enthralled and she shouldn't have been. There had been no nets in his boat when he arrived at the pier to collect her. He wasn't out to catch fish. What way did people earn livings? Mrs Beatty's tales were of times long gone now. Famine had put an end to a lot of the old ways. Lola had read the accounts for herself and listened quietly in powerful company to the plight of her home country.

'You're Irish,' Jack said, thinking aloud, 'but you don't speak Gaelic much?'

'Ask me the one thing you really want an answer to. I'll answer one question a day. How's that?' Lola said. Making games was a pastime and Jack would be good at such things. 'One probing question a day. That's all you get.'

'Are you Lord Rockford's mistress?' Jack asked immediately. 'That is today's question.' He sat on the stool and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and he looked at the floor.

'No.' Lola went to take a sip of the alcohol. It stung her eyes as her nose entered the cup. She pulled back. His moustache was no longer in a line but curved and the crinkle around his eyes was very pronounced.

'However, he wants me to be,' Lola said, as she wanted to be totally honest. This was another departure for her. 'He suggested an arrangement,' she continued. 'Once I'm better we'll discuss it more. A woman like me has to make decisions that shock most people. I can see that you're disgusted, but for an English lord he is a generous patron. I told him that I would consider his proposal.'

Jack took to his feet and started an angry pacing. She was losing his respect. Holy Irishmen did not respond well to the loose morals of the British upper classes. It had taken many years, even for a wayward Lizzie Chambers, to understand that these privileged few lived in a different world with less morals. Lola waited patiently on Jack's anger to subside. He sat again.

'Can you help me get dressed and we'll bury my treasure?' Lola asked. 'I'd do it myself but I'm still very weak.' Lola took a big slug from the cup and coughed and spluttered with the burning liquid in her throat. It scorched all the way down and turned her stomach slightly but she did the same again. It healed with its heat. 'I'd like



to stay on the Sands for a while, Jack. I've a lot of thinking to do. Would that be possible?'

'It's Lord Rockford's island. I'm sure you'll be allowed to stay as long as you want,' Jack snapped but instantly looked sorry for the coarseness of his reply.

Lola got out of bed slowly. There was living to do and she felt finally ready to start it.

The trunk was beside Jack's brooding bulk. 'I'd like it if you stayed,' he whispered as she passed him. His hand touched off hers and Lola closed her eyes. Fingers curled around her wrist and his body was breathlessly close. 'I want to be here so that I can ask you a question every day. I want to know everything about you.'

'Good,' Lola said.

He held onto her arm and must have been able to feel her throbbing for him.

'Let me get dressed,' she said. 'That liquor is powerful. I feel much better. Could you pour me some more?'

Lola heard the sound of pooten going into the cup as she heaved on a new dress. It was dark purple and one of her favourites as it didn't need much lacing or buttoning. She stood with her back to Jack and motioned for him to do three small buttons and the laces that tied her in. The feel of his hands tightening the material made Lola gasp. Each motion was excruciatingly powerful. Pulling. Fastening in. Safety.

Then there was a light touch on her neck, when he helped her put on the pearls too. It tickled. 'Done.' He was finished and she was sorry that he was. Opening her eyes she saw Jack standing with the cup. 'Here you go. But, I'm not letting you get drunk. A temptress is one thing but a drunk one is something we cannot have on the Sands,' he said, laughing. 'I was looking forward to you feeling better. But once you are, His Lordship will be back.'

'Don't think about that now,' Lola insisted. 'I'll make a parcel of the most precious things for us to bury. I think that it is Ivan who was the prowler. There's something sinister about him. I'm sorry if he is a relation of yours, but I don't trust him.'

'Christ! Ivan? No! He came here as a tutor to the Lord of the Sands and has always been a hated bastard. We all pitied the young fella as Ivan was never good to him. He battered and neglected the child, so much so that now he has threatened to kill Ivan if he even speaks to him.'

‘Gracious.’ Lola pictured the naked man on the beach. Despite everything he had endured, he was blood to the Lord Rockford. ‘Why is Ivan still here if he’s no longer employed?’

‘Good question,’ Jack replied. ‘We all want to know that. I’d imagine even the Lord of the Sands doesn’t know. He himself is not allowed to leave by order of his father. I suppose that I do feel sorry for him now that I explain his life to you.’

‘You don’t like the Lord of the Sands much really – do you?’

‘He’s not one of us,’ Jack admitted.

‘Neither am I?’ Lola said, sorting through her things.

‘But you aren’t one of them.’

Lola had never heard a true rebel’s opinion before. Her own father was a planted Protestant. Was she even Irish? Her husband would turn in his grave, if he knew she considered herself Irish. His allegiances were set from birth into an English military family. They’d not considered Lizzie Chambers good enough for their son. A young dowry-less bride with her murdered mother and drunk father. Her own extended family thought a poor military man who composed music was not a provider. They were right that the folly of marrying beneath herself had been inherited. As a young child, Lizzie Chambers was always rebelling, questioning and escaping the constraints of convention. Perhaps Lola had found a kindred spirit in this rebel, Jack C Fitzgerald? Would he hold her respect and attention and give her a new reason for living? Had Lola a cause close to her own heart before? Had she ever had a belief in something greater than her own survival? Possibly not.

As she watched Jack dig her a hiding place for her past, Lola thanked Mrs Beatty for giving this Jack as a gift. He was definitely the best present she ever got. The noise of the spade into the earth was over and she took her hands from her ears. The sound of earth on metal was too painful. She kissed the little casket containing most of her best pieces and tapped it into the ground and pulled the clay over it. Jack finished the job and stood back wiping under his cap with the back of his hand. Lola marked the spot with a flat stone and replanted the weeds around it.

‘Expertly done,’ Jack said, looking around. They were well hidden at the back of the house with trees shielding them from prying eyes. ‘You’ve done that before. I could do with you when we bury...’ He stopped.

‘When you do what?’ Lola asked. ‘I can ask *you* more than one

question a day.' She winked and stood up and flung dirt from the front of her dress. 'Tell me, Jack. What do you bury? Other than people? What do you need hidden? I trust you. Should you not return the favour?'

'We live under the thumb of laws that make it very hard for a man to make a shilling. I dance around them times. Sometimes I need to bury my sins.'

'Ah.' Lola couldn't hide her admiration. She clapped quickly in glee. 'I knew it! You're no fisherman.'

'I do fish,' Jack said. 'Just not very often. Sometimes I need to hide things.'

Lola glanced around. There wasn't another person in sight and birdsong rang through the trees and the swell of the sea could be heard behind them. 'You use the Sands?' Lola gasped. 'You rascal, Jack C Fitzgerald! You use the island's remoteness to your advantage.'

'Shhh.' Jack placed a finger to his lip. 'It's a secret.'

'But people must know?' Lola asked excitedly. She was giddy on the conversation and her alcohol medicine. 'What do you hide? And where?'

Jack started to walk away and Lola followed. He put the shovel over his shoulder and strode on. What a fine man he was from this angle. Lola was impressed. More than she'd ever been with anyone. And she never trotted to keep up with any man before. Ever!

Jack Fitzgerald kept his word. He was a gentle nurse with a commanding presence. A well-built, well-spoken man who used his brain as well as his muscles. Lola could tell that he had used his fists before now. He wasn't afraid of flouting the rules and he didn't bob his cap to Lord Rockford. Had he lain with a woman? It was hard to tell. But he knew how to speak to Lola. Knew just the right amount of attention to give her and just the right amount of care to show. Very few men had held her true and sincere interest. No man had captivated her like this – until now. And the way he looked at her! When might he try to kiss her? She would never ask him to. Lola would never give in.



\* \* \*

‘Thank you for helping me,’ Lola said back at the cottage. ‘Can we put that alcohol in tea? Let me make you some.’

‘I’m going to have to go,’ Jack said. ‘Walk with me to the shore. Patrick and Michael will be waiting. I’ve waved them away for the past three days, but you’re much better now. Keep that pistol to hand in case Ivan shows up. The Fitzgerald men will have a word with him when I come back in a day or so. Until then, take it easy on the poteen and get some rest.’

Lola stood in his way. He couldn’t leave. Somehow she’d have to get him to stay. Swooning wouldn’t work. He wasn’t that easily fooled. ‘Don’t go,’ she said. ‘Not yet.’

‘And when will be a good time for me to leave?’ he asked, not making her move. ‘I need to get back to making a few pennies.’

‘I’ll give you a few of them,’ Lola said and bit her lip. He didn’t take that well as he made a horrid face. She tried again. ‘You might at least stay for one more night?’

‘Walk with me to the rocks,’ Jack suggested, opening the door. ‘The fresh air did you good. Get more of the Sands’ breeze in your hair.’

Lola touched his arm and he turned back.

‘Kiss me, Jack C Fitzgerald. Before you go. Kiss me?’

# Chapter 12

‘What did you say?’ Jack asked Lola. Had she asked him to kiss her? He couldn’t have heard her right?

Lola’s beauty flushed and she let go of his arm.

‘It won’t make me stay,’ he said. Jack moved. He was leaving.

What was he doing? Lola had asked him to do the very thing he’d wanted to do from the moment he saw her and he had refused! A trembling Jack strode down the flagstones and turned for the rocky outcrop where the men would be bobbing about nearby. Sure enough there they were idling in his *Fair Lass*. Michael waved. Jack raised his hand. He shook his head and waved them away. He needed them to leave again.

‘Is she alive?’ came Patrick’s voice on the wind.

Jack turned to shout with all his might, ‘Yes. Come ashore tomorrow. Tomorrow.’

Michael waved acknowledgement and Jack’s *Fair Lass* turned for the mainland. He could return to the cottage and he should move quicker. He ran. The thumping of his heart matched his boots.

Lola was by the fire. Jack scooped her into his arms and buried his face in her neck. The strands of loose hair were soft against his cheek. Under eager lips the skin was warm, smooth and tasted sweet. She moaned and he clung to her. How soft her breast felt against his chest. Her back tightened and her neck strained back to let him suck it.

She winced and pulled back, but he needed to reach her lips and eyes. Another inhale of scent and the want in him grew larger. She would now be sure of his thoughts, his feelings, his need. But Lola recoiled again from his touch and he had to let her free.

‘I am cut there,’ she explained. It was then he remembered the injury. She had also been very ill. His attempt at seduction was ruined. ‘Don’t look so dejected,’ she said. ‘You just need to be gentle. I’m not a wild animal you need to catch and subdue.’ She giggled a little. ‘I know you can be gentle.’

Jack wanted to be angry with the reprimand but she was a woman who knew more about these things. He would have to let

her be in charge. Perhaps she'd ask him to kiss her again and he'd be ever so soft. 'I'm sorry,' he said and moved away.

'I thought you were leaving?' she asked. 'Did you not want to go?'

'I knew they'd be waiting. I sent them away and now you're stuck with me – the brute. For a bit longer.'

'You told me my kisses wouldn't make you stay. What changed your mind?'

'I don't know.' Jack found there was a hole coming in his right boot. 'I don't know what made me say that or what made me turn back.'

'You're lying to me, Jack C Fitzgerald. You've plenty of thoughts in that clever head of yours. And you know right well what made you return.'

She was teasing and Jack looked for the green bottle. A swig would help. 'I don't think you should be alone here until you're stronger,' he said. 'And I want you to prove to me that you can fire that pistol straight.'

'Are you a good shot?' Lola asked. 'I thought the Irish couldn't own any weapons? Isn't that one of those Penal Laws? How do you know about guns, Jack Fitzgerald?'

'Mrs Beatty would want me to look after you.' Jack found the bottle and took a slug. He had his back to Lola and still his groin throbbed.

'So if I asked you to kiss me you would refuse me again?' Lola said. 'You didn't come back for a kiss at all then?'

Jack gulped. The angels were listening, his prayer was answered. He would be gentle this time. Nothing would spoil it when he took her in his arms. Just as he turned around there was a slight knock on the door.

'Hullo?' Lola called.

Jack's face fell. It was the Lord of the Sands and he was carrying a bottle Jack recognised.

'Brandy. Some of the best smuggled French Fitzgerald brandy for you,' the visitor said, smiling. 'There's not much a man can bring a cultured lady on the Sands.' The long-haired man lifted the bottle towards Lola.

Jack grunted in annoyance.

'Thank you. You're very welcome,' Lola said and offered him Jack's stool. The man was exceptionally well-dressed in a tailed

jacket with a high-collared shirt. The cravat was shiny emerald green.

‘Things are basic on the Isle of Sands,’ he said, looking around with unease.

‘I’m only settling in and I’ve been unwell. I think it is safe enough for you to be here as I don’t think you can catch the fever I had. You are welcome,’ Lola said.

‘I’ve found that most things don’t kill me even if I catch them,’ the Lord of the Sands said. ‘I met Patrick on the shore the other day and he told me of your misfortune. We all thought that maybe the curse would take you. Thank heavens not!’

‘Mr Fitzgerald here, has taken very good care of me and yes, thankfully I’m feeling much better. I’ve been taking some medicine,’ she pointed to Ivan’s bottle, ‘and the physician assured me that I’m not infectious.’

Jack’s anger almost choked him. Were they never going to be left in peace? The way this blackguard was staring at Lola was making Jack heave.

‘You’ve heard that I’m a bastard in more ways than one,’ he said to Lola. ‘They call me the Lord of the Sands. But my name is Mortimer. Mortimer Tallon.’

‘Tallon?’ Lola asked agog.

‘Ivan is my uncle. I am told that my mother is his sister. She’s been sent God knows where. Ivan says that’s what happens to harlots. They get abandoned. Is that why you are here, because you’re a harlot?’ Mortimer asked. Jack leaped forward, looking to take the young man by the throat for his insults. As Mortimer made a retreat across the floor, Lola stood to his defence and pulled Jack from him.

‘I’m sorry, Mr Tallon. Jack worries about my honour. Even though there is very little of it left,’ Lola said with a wry frown. ‘I am very sorry.’

‘It’s me who needs to apologise,’ Mortimer said, holding out his hand to steady himself. He gave Jack a dirty look. ‘I’m not used to human interaction and I’m definitely not used to a lady’s company. My apologies.’

‘Accepted,’ Lola said as Jack went to fill himself a mug from the green bottle.

‘I thought we might be friends? You see, I thought Jack had left on the *Fair Lass* and I wished to introduce myself properly.’

‘You are a slimy dog,’ Jack spat as he spoke. ‘You scuttled here pretty quickly.’

‘I didn’t want a confrontation. I wanted it all to be calm. I wished to ask Mrs de Lacy to tea and to see my art. I’m not interested in your renowned abilities, Mrs de Lacy. Well, not yet at least. I wish to know how to behave and speak with a lady. An education if you will. Mrs Beatty tried her best but she said you might be a better teacher.’

‘That makes sense,’ Lola said, directing her voice at Jack. ‘Of course I’ll visit with you, Mortimer. And soon.’

‘Fabulous. Come whenever he leaves?’ Mortimer whispered to Lola, as if Jack were not present. ‘He’ll be gone soon and then we can become proper friends. I can also give you some things to make this cottage pretty.’ He got to his feet and made his way to the door. ‘Adieu.’ He bowed very low indeed and Jack laughed aloud.

Lola’s expression was cross when they were alone again.

‘He doesn’t have an ounce of sense,’ Jack said. ‘He deserves a kick in the arse. No wonder Ivan flogged him.’ He was being cruel. As usual there was something spoiling Jack’s desires and ambitions. Something always stood in his way. When he was on the cusp of greatness, there was a hurdle to overcome.

‘Now where were we?’ Lola said on her tiptoes and her mouth met his own. Her lips were like warm dough. The tip of her tongue tasted of poteen and salt and he opened his mouth wider to accept it.

What was she doing?

The swirl of his own mouth met hers. Was this her way of kissing?

Whatever it was it could not end. He could do this forever. His hands gripped Lola and he remembered to breathe through his nose and moaned with pleasure when her palm cupped his cock. It strained against his trousers and the rubbing made him harder still. She knew what he wanted her to do before he even thought it.

It was immoral, sinful, and perfect.

How was he naked?

He only recalled removing his boots.

He was never totally exposed in front of a woman before. Yet, Lola had seen all of his body for she had stopped their kissing to watch herself caressing him to the edge of reason. His favourite toy now adored her too. It responded to every touch and look.



Throbbled and twitched with the hardness almost unbearable.

‘Undress,’ he suggested.

‘Not yet,’ she whispered and pushed him gently towards the bed. Jack lay back against the mattress and cursed as her mouth descended his chest. He spread his legs and lifted his pelvis. She went there with her light kisses and Jack’s eyes sprung open to watch. His tip entered her mouth and the heat was ecstasy. When she sucked him and moved her grip on his shaft he groaned loudly. That was unbelievably good. He wanted her to do that forever too. The flick of tongue across the top and then the descending onto the whole of him... *Jesus*. Her mouth was far too wet, warm, and wonderful. His cock was lost in her mouth and he was going to burst.

He fumbled at her to stop.

Lola arose to smile and kiss his mouth and melt him into another form of heaven.

‘I need you,’ she whispered.

‘Yes, Christ, I want you so fucking bad.’

She straddled him and hoisted her dress. There was the flesh of her thigh, the tickle of hair, the moistness, the heat, the opening, the pressure, the entry, the friction. Jack couldn’t contain the pleasure. It rippled as she rode and ground down on him. With each rise and fall he moaned and gripped at her. She was in charge taking all of his cock deeper. He was almost at the edge a few times and gritted his teeth holding back.

She leaned ever so slightly backwards and ordered him, ‘let go. Take me.’

He heard those words over and over as he thrust upwards as she ground downwards. The spurts left him at the peak of the best sensation he’d ever known. It came thunderously up again and again. With satisfied pants he lingered inside.

She kissed him. He wanted to speak but that would ruin it all. He was losing time for now she was still lying on his chest, still clothed and sighing. Had he been gentle? It was too late to ask.

He had disappeared into their lovemaking. Nothing had prepared him for her. From the moment he saw her on the pier, nothing would be the same. Lying with a woman was changed forever too. It was more than a physical release. His mind and body moved and performed all by itself and his heart was exhausted. Was this what love felt like? Would she laugh at him if he asked her

that?

‘Did I hurt you?’ he asked instead, touching Lola’s shoulder, hair and the soft well at the back of her neck. He tickled there. She sighed again. He liked that noise. ‘Was I rough?’

Lola shook her head. ‘You were very gentle,’ she reassured. ‘I’m just weak with it all.’

Jack lifted Lola off him and rolled her to his side. He curled her into him. ‘Rest.’ It was an order but she was already dozing. He could hear her breaths lengthen. He felt cold but there was no way he was going to disturb Lola now. Jack cursed in a whisper. He had surrendered to this woman and he was captured. She had invaded his mind for days now and this act had cemented his imprisonment. His stomach lurched in desire when he considered this union might happen again. With each thump of his heart he committed more – and now his cock was hers too. Jack Fitzgerald had never been so content or happy. What an experience she’d given him. She’d taken charge and he had let her.

He’d have to leave though. A wave of loneliness attacked and made him teary.

She wouldn’t feel the same. How could a woman of the world, with so many admirers be satisfied with a simple Irish man with no wealth or property?

Another curse was needed. Then he uttered a prayer for absolution while making it clear to the Lord himself that Jack Fitzgerald would do everything in his power to make this sin happen over and over again. If Lola was temptation, then Jack was destined for hell and he didn’t care. There was no changing the wind – you just had to sail with it and Jack loved Lola and that was that.

# Chapter 13

This was the crucial part of the seduction process. The awakening was the difficult step.

There had been very little chase or hunt for Jack C Fitzgerald. Lola knew that after copulation a man's needs changed. Usually it was simple enough, he'd either want more or he didn't. Lola usually timed the sex act to her advantage. But, she had not thought much about the tactical seduction of Jack at all. It had been fast and also enjoyable. She simply responded to her own needs and let it happen. Now where was she?

Jack would tire and leave. She would miss him. This was a mistake.

Madame du Gare had tutored her well and Lola had let men into her bed but they never, ever were irreplaceable. Even Edmund, who came long before the myriad of others, was a means to an end. Edmund Chambers gave her the some kind of love and the escape she craved. She missed him, but she never felt great passion for him.

This was new territory. Lola nibbled on a fingernail as Jack snored on his back. For the first time ever, she had taken a man for no other reason other than she wanted him. There was no escaping an unhappy home, no starvation to quell, no powerful ally to lobby. Jack C Fitzgerald had wanted no payment from her, and other than wanting him to stay, she had no reason for mounting him. Dear goodness. What had she done?

This was the time she'd find out. If she moved he'd waken and then what? The sick tiredness was hampering the usual confidence she had in her abilities to read men's desires. From when she let Edmund see her breasts before they were married to the long, chaste spell during which she successfully secured the Count's affections, Lola knew her market and catered to their tastes. There was no planning and plotting here though.

Had she judged Jack's ardour correctly?

Had she judged her own properly?

She didn't think she had.

Sweet God!

His chest had very little hair, the nipples were perfect, the muscles pronounced from labour and his crotch was unbelievable. The thighs were tight, his calves sculpted and his feet presentable. Jack was handsome and if she shaved him and dressed him appropriately, he would rival any one of the gentlemen she danced with in the palaces of Europe. Could Jack dance? Did she want him to?

His hand lay on his moving chest. It was rough and large, ingrained with dirt and sallow from Irish weather. Yet his nails were short and clean and his scent was extremely pleasing. Lola bit another tiny piece from her own nail. He was divine. Despite the quickness of their lovemaking she had never felt such passion with anyone else. What was she going to do?

He might want more from her. Most lovers did. But, what would she achieve with more of this dangerous adventuring? Succumbing to her own base needs was all very well, but a woman had to be savvy and think ahead. Losing her heart to a man with no prospects and an empty purse wasn't sensible and all her years of toil might be for nothing. Madame du Gare would laugh her sides sore if Lola linked Jack's arm when they next went to Paris. Paris? Would Jack want to go there? Would he have means to go? Lola needed Paris.

The next fingernail got her attention and she examined the rafters in the ceiling and the parts of the room she could see. Was this to be her lot in life? Was this all there would be for the hurt, the pain, the torture she put herself through to succeed? She had to relieve her bladder in the hole in the outhouse many steps from the front door. What comfort could she have living here?

Jack moved his arm and hugged her in a little closer. It was far too nice in his arms. She couldn't think properly. Scheming and plotting were Lola's life but Jack's smell had put her normally sharp brain into a spin. Nothing made sense. If he kissed her again she'd possibly lose her mind entirely. Time was running short. Lola needed to be certain of what she was doing and why – but how could any woman be in total control when those arms wanted her. Dear God in heaven, she was drowning.

Mrs Beatty smirked when Lola closed her eyes. She tried to imagine what her friend and nurse would say if she were here. But she didn't speak. Nothing was helping Lola make decisions. Why had she not just simply answered Mrs Beatty's letter and left it at

that? She had come to the Sands because something had drawn Lola to come hear the woman's words in person.

Lola held her breath and nipped more nail off. Mrs Beatty had left Sligo when Lola was a teenager and then Lola had eloped. Lola leaned heavily on Mrs Beatty's advice and so she kept abreast of her movements within households. Attractive and clever, Mrs Beatty had also taught Lola a great deal about the birds and the bees. Mrs Beatty had stopped getting someone to write for her when Lola started dancing and whoring her way around Europe. When the letters stopped Lola worried her nurse was disgusted. Perhaps their lack of communication for that time had nothing to do with Lola's wayward life and was only that Mrs Beatty had taken the lord's illegitimate son to her island home and she was afraid of the secret being known.

Mrs Beatty had kept an eye on Mortimer Tallon for the last ten years. That was clear now. She had asked Lola "to come at her earliest convenience to help with a secret, grave matter that required a young woman's touch and charms".

Mrs Beatty was always a matchmaker and hence Lola thought that this was a ruse, and the Lord of the Sands had written the beautiful letter! Lola always presumed that the letter was a trick to get Lola matched off. Therefore, she had not been in a great hurry to do as Mrs Beatty had asked. She had dilly-dallied and Mrs B had died. This mistake stuck fast in her gullet. Her mind and heart had let them both down.

Or perhaps, the matter Mrs B mentioned had been to reunite Lord Rockford and his son? Or, had Mrs Beatty known the island to be empty of a young woman's charms and her matchmaking was definitely in the front of her mind? Who did Mrs Beatty have in mind as a husband for Lola? She had always hoped Lola would wed again and bear children. Would Mrs Beatty have seen Jack C Fitzgerald as the man for Lola? Everything inside Lola leaped at this idea. Maybe, Jack was the man Mrs B meant for Lola. Yes, that was it!

But, if Mrs B did think Jack a good possibility then why had she not sung Jack's praises or mentioned him specifically in the letter? Yet, she hadn't really mentioned Mortimer either and she was obviously his nurse and he was involved in the writing of the correspondence. Might it have been that she saw the Lord of the Sands as a suitor for Lola? Mrs Beatty would have loved them both

as her own and perhaps seen them as a good match for each other? Or had she summoned Lola to help educate and make him ready to join society? There was a great deal to consider and Lola's mind was going in circles. But first, what do to with the man in her bed? If only she had an inkling of Mrs Beatty's thoughts. If only she had guidance of what to do next.

This longing and butterflies were all new and if truth be told Lola was scared of making the wrong choice. Much of her life had been orchestrating change in other people's lives, and sometimes this had put her own in danger. Many times she had fled but where could she flee to now? And why did she want to stay in this position? Everything inside her told her to try to rest in the one place and start to make a team for herself. 'Settle down,' Mrs Beatty would say.

Madame du Gare had been a formidable mentor in Paris and now Jack might be her mate. A soulmate? Lola nipped the side of her finger and it bled. Sucking on a trickle of blood, she prayed silently for the good spirits of the Sands to guide her now.

Lola's fate was once more on a track, but which one should she work towards and march forward on? The agony.

Jack stirred and Lola pretended to be sleeping. It was easier than greeting that need men have when they waken. He slid from the bed and Lola heard him find his britches. It took him a while to find his boot and Lola had to turn in the bed for fear he'd see her grinning at his curses. Jack Fitzgerald blasphemed a great deal, and who could blame him? She liked to hear him, no matter what he was saying.

The thump of loading fuel from the turf stack into a large creel basket was welcome. Her lover was working outside and when she went out there it was a nice sight. It was time she made a move herself to welcome the day and whatever the future would bring.

'While you are here, I thought you might show me around the island?' Lola asked the bare-chested man. He was glorious. She was smitten. Very smitten. She had to look away. 'Please? If you wouldn't mind, we might walk a little and you could show me around?' she asked.

'There's plenty of work a man could be doing. But it's a good idea for you to get your bearings. It won't take long. Do you think you're fit enough for walking though?' Jack asked. 'I know you were exhausted by other things.' He stopped at that. She reached

higher with her lips and found his. That kiss was... It was... perfect. 'Don't you want to talk about what happened?' Jack asked when she tore herself from his mouth.

'What is there to say?' Lola asked, flinching. There was a great deal to discuss. A mountain of questions was building between them – but she had no answers. It was best to ignore the obvious. Distracting each other and exploring an island was nicer. Their island. 'Pull on your shirt and I'll get my bonnet. I'll put something to eat in the basket and while the sun is still warm we can go on an adventure?'

The way he followed Lola constantly with that loving gaze made her melt. She could resist him for now but she couldn't dismiss for long what that sea dog of an Irishman did to the place between her legs.

Her whole body was wobbly when they got over the first low wall and out over the biggest hillock. Was it lovesick she was? Or still weak from the fever? Lola breathed heavily and marvelled at the sight of the fertile fields reaching the sea.

'There's the bogland. Marshes with the peat,' Jack said, pointing inland. 'The sheep keep the heather off the fields and the lands here are leased by ourselves and a few others. They come and go with me on the Fair Lass. There's not many of the fine brood of men left but they usually scoop up all the good women.'

'Usually,' Lola said and grasped Jack's hand. He squeezed it in return. 'And what do you call that large mountain-like mound of rocks?' The centre of the island sloped upwards to a smattering of large boulders and cliffs.

'Túr Hill, I suppose is its title, there's another on the mainland of the same name. The sheep like to climb it but they always come down from it if there's going to be heavy rain,' Jack replied, 'and there is the stream with the freshest, spring water. It flows up through the bogland and out to the sea. Will we go on? There's not a lot more to see on this side. The coast goes all the way around with some nice fine sand. Hence the name of the island.'

'Let's go all the way,' Lola said, holding her bonnet against the wind coming in from the Atlantic. 'I'd like to see it all with you.'

Jack helped her navigate the nettle patches, the mucky holes and stone walls. Once they reached the shore, Lola stopped to catch her breath.

'We can walk on that damp hard sand down there near the

water now most of the way back around to the rocks on the other side,' Jack said. 'We beach the Fair Lass here sometimes but where Mrs Beatty's cottage is it is deeper with not too strong a current. We can take the boat to land in there most of the time. If we are careful. We should have had a pier built but there was a shortage of men due to the famine. Many a ship is lost on the rocks between the Sands and the Donegal shore. It takes a good seaman to navigate the hidden rocks and currents. The light-turret was built by our ancestors to warn sailors to stay clear. Once we get to Túr Light, I can introduce you to Seanín Childs. He's a pious fellow, and near there is the Fitzgerald hovel we use for storage and then we are almost back home.'

He said 'home'. Lola listened on as Jack told her more about the caves by the light-keepers' hut and again about the mermaid's curse.

'Pirates and legends. It's all very exciting,' Lola said, panting to keep up with his long strides, but as always she refused to give in. 'Where would you want a wharf or pier built?' she asked, scanning the coastline. 'Where we came ashore? When I came here on that precarious rocky platform? Is that really the best place to bring in a boat?'

Jack had sweat on his brow and he rubbed his moustache. 'Aye,' he replied. 'I suppose it is the best spot, but a man needs to know what he's doing.'

Lola saw the turret of Túr Light. Jack was correct, the island wasn't too big. There was the smoke from Mr Childs' chimney. However, she didn't want to meet anyone else. Lola wanted Jack and the Isle of Sands all to herself.



# Chapter 14

The basket-carrying Jack was doing would have to stop. Seanín would mock him for sure. Jack thrust the wicker contraption at Lola as the figure of the light-keeper came out of his hut.

‘Dia Dhuit,’ Seanín called at them both and waved.

Jack refused to shake his hand, explaining, ‘Good to see you but we’ve been near sickness. Stand back a little.’

Lola squinted into the sun and greeted him in Gaelic. Even married, pious, freckled Seanín gazed longingly at Lola.

Jack gave him a look that warned him to cease his ogling.

‘And speak in English,’ Jack ordered when Seanín started a string of chat about the great, dry weather. ‘It’s easier if you speak in English. This is Mrs Lola de Lacy. She’s a friend of Mrs B’s.’

‘I heard you were here and unwell too?’ Seanín said, his short red hair shining in the sunlight.

‘I’m still weak so I possibly should keep moving. I might fall down at any time,’ Lola said, making a small waver in her stance.

Jack reached for her arm and said, ‘Why didn’t you say you were feeling light-headed? Let’s keep moving.’

Bidding good day to Mr Childs, Lola leaned on Jack’s arm. She nestled in closer and he supported her weight a little with his arm across her back. ‘We’ll have given Childs a good eyeful. Us being in this embrace,’ Jack said when they were at a safe distance. ‘There’s no need for us to stop at our shed. It is a mess and I’m afraid you aren’t going to make it back to the cottage.’

‘I’m fine. I just wanted away from gossips. That’s why staying on the island seemed like such a good idea. I have no time or energy for small-minded people. Fredrick warned me about Mr Childs,’ Lola said.

The mention of Lord Rockford stopped Jack from walking.

‘Childs is not the worst,’ he replied. ‘It’s that wife of his, that’s the issue. He’s driven daft with her warnings about his soul being captured by wanton women who will crawl out of the sea looking to have their wicked way with him.’ Jack laughed and enjoyed his own humour. It had been a while since he found himself amusing

and even longer since he enjoyed someone's company. Family were loved but they weren't always easy to be with. 'His Lordship doesn't know Seanín well enough to give his opinion on the man. But then, when did that ever stop the aristocracy from mouthing off?'

'He told me that Childs and his wife are spreading rumours about my reputation. They have judged me without knowing me.'

Jack let Lola out of his hold and took the basket back. 'We're almost there. Can you manage now? I don't know what you made me carry this for?' Jack swung the basket high. 'We didn't take time to stop.'

'Let's walk on to the shore and have it there,' Lola suggested. Jack looked at the hills and the sky and agreed.

The beach was, of course, empty and the sand was dry and warm. The sound of the breeze in the grasses was pleasant and the chatter of birdsong was drowned out by the waves. The flat, calm sea further out looked like glass and Jack was glad he wasn't trying to move the Fair Lass on a day of its kind. He swung off his shirt and lay on the coarse ground, patting it for Lola to join him. There wasn't any need for conversation as she filled their mugs with water and cut the bread and laced it with lard. The cheese smelt high in the heat and Jack nibbled at it while Lola's lovely hands prepared an apple by skinning and coring it.

'How fancy this is,' Jack teased. 'What a grand day. I've thoroughly enjoyed myself.' The rays warmed his chest and he held his face into the constant glow. Lola's bonnet shaded her pale complexion from the sun. Her dress seemed hot and heavy. 'Are you feeling all right now? Do you want to sit in the shade?' Jack asked, looking around for a possible location.

'I think I might swim before I start on the picnic,' Lola said, standing to remove her bonnet and then her shoes. Jack sat up. What had she said? Swim? She was rolling down her stockings. Jack jumped to his feet and looked into the distance. Childs might have his spyglass out by now. Jack tried to block the disrobing Lola from where Childs might be watching. 'What are you worrying about?' Lola asked him as she unhooked a few clasps and her dress fell.

'Christ!' Jack said. 'Leave on the smock-thing at least.'

'Your breasts are bare so mine shall be too,' Lola said and with one fluid movement her remaining garment was pulled over her head.

Jack was flabbergasted and his eyes darted from Lola's milky

skin to the fields, the light, the waves, the horizon and back to her pert bottom as it was heading for the incoming tide. He'd have to take off after her? She was naked. Sweet fuck!

He dithered and muttered under his breath. Was it more indecent to sit and watch or join her?

He couldn't decide.

His boots were nudged off by his sweltered feet and his conscience was boiling almost as much as his desire. What would a good man do? What would his father say? What would the priest say? What in the name of all that was holy was she doing now? Dancing? Jack gawped. Holding a hand to shield the sun from the spectacle, he saw Lola beckoning him to join her.

Calling out his answer might be heard by Seanín Childs. He unbuttoned his trousers and then thought better of his notions. She was causing a giant bulge but he didn't want to be compared to the Lord of the Sands. Lola had seen a better-endowed man in the waves. Jack knew from experience that things shrunk in the cold water. He would not provide her with full evidence of his inadequacies.

Lola squealed. Jack laughed at the hoots and hollers. She was an incredible woman with no qualms about showing off. Did she worry at all about being seen? Did she know what she did to him with just a smile or a sniff of her hair?

'Your common decency is like a fragile cobweb. You must protect it and allow it to catch all flies of evil,' Mr Childs himself had quoted the priest on more than one occasion. Well, Jack's cobwebs were all cleaned away. That was for sure. There wasn't a shred of decency left as he chuckled on at his naked lover in the sea.

Lola splashed about and Jack munched the apple and bread and slugged back the water. Mrs Beatty had never mentioned this wild woman. He would remember if she had. She had mentioned wayward children and of trying to keep her ward in check. She had mentioned that there was a girl who stripped regularly and shocked the church when she removed a man's wig and laughed at his wispy baldness. Perhaps this bold child was Lola? But Jack would recall such a name. However, these memories were all things this screaming child-like woman in the waves would do.

The wet, glistening stride of her nakedness up the beach made his mouth hang open. There was a massive pressure in his groin.

She would see his desire here in the open air and he couldn't look around for fear someone else was drooling too. He picked up her chemise. With difficulty he ignored his cock and made his way to cover her modesty.

'I will give in to wear it if you are that worried,' Lola promised and Jack breathed a sigh of relief. 'It was so cold in there. You were right not to come in. You're used to that sensation when you swim ashore. On bad days it must be fierce.'

'We aren't here in bad weather. I wouldn't leave the Fair Lass at anchor in rough seas.'

Lola held her forehead. 'I'm silly. I feel so light-headed now. I've done too much today. I thought the salt water would help my injury.'

Jack held out his arm and she linked it. Her skin was cold and he shivered when she was tight to his side. 'But if you had a pier to shelter your mooring spot it would be better for you?' Lola said, turning around towards the landing spot. 'If you had a place just there, you could come and go as you please and not worry about drowning or your boat breaking away?'

'We always worry about such things.' Jack scowled. 'Lord Rockford will want payment for his interest in the Sands. I'm not happy about that. We'll talk no more about it.'

'He has offered to make the cottage more homely. Perhaps add proper flooring and lime the walls. He wants to provide a builder and supplies for more rooms, if I'd like that. But for all that work he said that it will require a secure berth. Are there other boats? I've asked that he use yours.'

Jack's hackles rose. Lola was on the sand nibbling at the food and he stood shading her from the sun. Had she agreed to the Lord's demands? It sounded like she had.

'It's all good for the island and for you, Jack C Fitzgerald. You'll have more trips and passages to and from the island and if he builds a wharf, you will have it for evermore. The Sands won't miss out this time.'

Jack's mouth was dry and his shoulders sunk. He couldn't find the words, so he cursed aloud.

Lola ate on and sipped the water. She was serious and earnest. What would a moral man do with such a woman?

'And what does he want in return?' Jack asked. 'What have you agreed to?'

‘Nothing. I was unwell and he’d have promised anything to make me better. He’s not the worst, you know and he cares for me.’

‘Does he now?’ Jack flung a handful of sand away from them. ‘Cares for himself, you mean.’

‘You’re cross?’ Lola asked, not meeting his gaze. ‘You don’t approve. But think about it, Jack. This will only bring good things for you.’

Jack pulled on his shirt as he suddenly felt cold. He sat with purpose. The day was changing and so was his mood. Could she not see this was spoiling everything? Was she blind? Lola de Lacy had no morals at all. It was true. She was a temptress.

‘It might never happen,’ she said breezily like it was another picnic she was discussing. ‘He is fickle. Like all men.’

‘DO NOT compare me to him!’ Jack shouted and sat away from Lola. ‘I’m nothing like him. I think it is you who is fickle with your affections.’

‘Affections?’ Lola didn’t seem afraid of his outburst. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You lay with me a few hours ago and now you’re trying to talk me into letting you lie with someone else? Trying to make it sound like it will be good for me,’ Jack said and spat on the ground. ‘And you call men fickle!’

‘I’m not asking you to do anything,’ she said calmly. ‘He might have changed his mind. His alliances and thoughts move quickly. I refuse to fall out about something that may never happen.’

Jack was on his feet again and looking out to sea. There would be a relief when Patrick and Michael returned. Out on the water Jack was sure of himself.

‘Sit back down and enjoy the rest of the day,’ Lola urged. ‘Don’t spoil this, Jack. We are together.’

But she had made a crack between them. It was a gaping wound and she didn’t see it – or feel it. What could he say or do now? He sat and she shuffled around to sit between Jack’s legs. She took both his arms and draped them around her shoulders. There was a sigh as she leaned back against his crotch with her buttocks and his chest with her back. Jack could feel the swell of her breasts and breath and he closed his eyes and smelt her hair.

‘Are you still angry?’ Lola asked. ‘Is it that you want me all for yourself?’

‘Yes.’ The word caught in Jack’s throat so it was barely audible.

He said it again, 'Yes. I want you for myself. Just me.'

Lola patted his arm. 'But don't you know? I am all yours, Jack C Fitzgerald.'

# Chapter 15

Jack was lying in front of the fire wrapped in a blanket with his back to Lola. Things were not going to plan. Normal men would have wanted to make love to her on the beach or at least carried her straight to bed. But Jack Fitzgerald hadn't done what she expected. He was in a mood all evening and spoke only when spoken to. Did he even remember what it had been like when he was inside her?

If Lola was true to what was between them, Jack just didn't want to share her with Lord Rockford. And for once, Lola didn't want to play one man off another. There was no enjoyment in Jack's discomfort and he was stubborn in his refusal to give in to Lola's manipulations.

When she was a paid dancer, men rarely cared who she had been with. Then, when she became a mistress her exclusivity was paid for in spades. Yet now, a man was expecting her to be chaste for him alone. This was new. It also was appreciated. Lola felt valued like never before. How odd that felt.

'I'll find a way to make this work,' Lola promised Jack's sleeping back. He never let on to hear her. 'I'll find a way,' she said again.



\* \* \*

The morning was awkward. Lola hadn't slept well and Jack had tossed and turned on the hard floor. There was no conversation at all until they were both washed, dressed and eating bread at the table. Both had to sit on the table for there were no chairs. The logs they had tried to use as seats were long since burned.

‘Might you find me a chair on your travels, do you think?’ Lola asked. ‘I hope that you’ll come back here soon?’

‘Depends on the weather,’ Jack grunted. ‘Lord Rockford might bring you finely-carved fancy furniture? Or the Lord of the Sands might have some that would suit Your Ladyship.’

‘Don’t be an arse!’ Lola said.

‘Your language is as bad as your morals.’

Lola gasped. ‘And what about your moral compass? Why is it fine for a man to do as he pleases, but not a woman?’

Jack made a guttural noise which disapproved of all she was saying. He shrugged. ‘That’s the way of things. It doesn’t suit you to use such bad words.’

‘You hypocrite! You’re the worst blasphemer I’ve ever heard!’

‘Don’t make me say something I’ll regret,’ Jack said, gripping the table edge. ‘*The Fair Lass* will be here shortly and then I’ll be gone. You can say whatever you like then. There will be no one here to hear it.’

The thought of Jack leaving stung. Even when they were disagreeing, Jack was with her. ‘When will you be back? And don’t say it depends on the weather. I’ll need food. I’m asking because I don’t want to starve out here.’

‘You should leave the Sands,’ Jack said. ‘Make up your mind to go. Especially once your health improves.’

Lola licked honey off her fingers. He was making sense. If she wasn’t going to have Jack Fitzgerald in that bed in the corner, there wasn’t much else to keep her on the island.

‘You’ll be bored of the simple life here in a week. The likes of you will want the fancy houses, clothes and dancing. You’ll be crying for me to take you from this place.’ Jack pulled on his boots and looked for his jacket. It hung on the end of the bed and he snatched it. ‘I have to bring all the necessary things out to the Lord of the Sands and Ivan. Seanín always has demands too. I’ll be back before the week is out and we’ll see what notions you have by then.’

Lola grimaced. Jack liked to be strong and in control and when he wasn’t sure of himself he got angry and aggressive. She’d observed that in him over their time together. Jack didn’t mean to be so nasty, but it was going to be hard to forgive him if he kept it up. ‘Stop trying to belittle me,’ Lola said, fixing her hair in the cracked mirror. ‘I shall miss you while you’re away and you’ll miss



me too. Admit it.'

'Huh!' Jack said, thumping the last boot fully onto his foot. 'I'll admit nothing of the sort!'

'I'll walk with you to the landing rock and then retrace my steps and go visit Mortimer,' Lola said. 'And don't look at me that way. He invited me and it's neighbourly of me to visit.'

'You wouldn't speak to Seanín though?' Jack observed.

'I might rectify that this morning, too, then,' Lola snapped back. 'Let's get 'cross-boy Jack' onto his boat. But before you go I want to give you something. You took care of me and never left me when I needed you the most. I'd like for you to take this.' Lola held the miniature portrait set in a single gold frame. She had brought it to give to Mrs Beatty but now that she was not on the earthly plain, Lola handed it to Jack. 'Please don't refuse.'

Jack took it and carefully turned it over in his large grasp. He sniffed and those blue eyes were watery. 'Thank you,' he murmured and wiped the back of his hand across his nose.

'If you don't want the portrait please return it but you're welcome to the frame.'

Jack held it to his heart. 'I will treasure the portrait most of all,' he said.

Lola blushed. This was unusual. Lola rarely blushed. 'Good,' she said. 'Now, let's get you to your *Fair Lass*.'

As she was walking past him, Jack took her wrist, like he had done all those days before and said, 'I thought that there was only one *Fair Lass* for me. But I was wrong. You are the fairest lass I've ever seen.' He leaned to kiss her cheek and Lola let him. Her breath held and his lips touched her cheek a second time. If she moved slightly his mouth might meet hers – but then what? Jack's peck came again and Lola moved away for the door. He was leaving. There was going to be a whole ocean of water between them for days. Lola needed to get a grip on these flutterings and urges. 'I'll be back in three days,' Jack confirmed as he strode out into the sunlight. The walk to the rocks was a silent one.

The groan of the *Fair Lass* almost sounded like a dog greeting its master. The vessel was pulled expertly into the deep pool. When Patrick came ashore, it was obvious that he had been shorn like a sheep. The tan of his face did not match the colour nearest his hairline and he looked almost bald from a distance. Lola nodded and both men's eyes seemed glad to see her.

Michael beamed and his greeting was animated. 'You look well, Mrs de Lacy,' he called from the boat.

'Thank you, Michael. I'm much improved,' Lola said.

Jack was sullen but once he was aboard he did raise his hand in goodbye and called, 'Three days' time. Be safe and well until then.'

'Thank you, Jack C Fitzgerald and I'll miss you,' Lola called. Patrick took a double-look back but Jack smiled, nodded and waved again. 'Goodbye.'

Never good with farewells, Lola left the rocky outcrop and returned to the path. She'd seen the turret of the folly from her walk with Jack and knew roughly where he was lodging. There was no way in hell she looked back to see if Jack was watching her. She was lonely and concerned at the departure but on she marched to the folly. There was a short avenue of oak tree saplings and in a shaded clearing there was the ornate structure. It was a big circular stone room with long, narrow windows all the way around. A sign on the door was carved quite expertly in driftwood. There was no one about. Lola sneaked peeks in the dirty windows that were low enough. There was little to see other than a chaos of books and paper. The tinkling sound of shell wind chimes was pleasant and she sat in a sun chair and watched the path from whence she came.

She had forgotten that the Lord of the Sands was possibly now bathing. He would come all the way back home – naked. Normally, Lola would have liked that but today she was weary. There was a definite freedom in sea-swimming without clothes. After yesterday, Lola could see the appeal and vowed that she would try it regularly herself, if she felt safe to do so.

There were tiny birds hopping about and chirping to each other. Lola watched and saw a rabbit nibbling at something in the distance. As she guiltily thought of him for her snares she failed to realise the swimmer was returning. He wore a flamboyant robe with gilded flowers and swirling feathers. It was splendid in reds and blues and shone in the spring light.

'I saw Jack sail away. Somehow I missed seeing you but I hoped you'd come. Welcome, Mrs de Lacy,' Mortimer said, opening the double doors to his folly and then he tied his long black hair back in a ribbon. 'Please stay outside until the smell eases. I live in this one room very comfortably but the stove makes it smoky at times depending on the wind. It's not meant to have a chimney, you see, and I'm an exceptionally bad cook. But welcome nonetheless. Is it

too early in the day for brandy? I always have one after my swim. It warms the cockles.'

'It might act as medicine. Yes, please,' Lola said. 'The poteen definitely brought colour to my cheeks.'

'Ah, so you've met the real bastard of the Sands and sampled his hooch? Ivan Tallon, the wicked uncle, you've met him?'

'I have.' Lola grimaced. 'And the experience was potent.'

'Meeting Ivan or the poteen?' Mortimer laughed. 'I know what you meant, my dear. Ivan is a vile creature. No one likes him. Even his own mother couldn't have loved him.'

'And he was your schoolmaster, I believe? Your tutor?'

'Unfortunately. He was sent here with me when they realised that I needed some formal education. I was quite happy to roam free, but I did ask to be taught to read. My own fault. It seems he was the obvious choice as he was an uncle.'

'Did Mrs Beatty care you as well?' Lola asked. When Mortimer's expression looked uncertain Lola added, 'She was my nursemaid. But my mother's family dismissed her when I was almost thirteen. She was considered as a bad influence. I just presumed it was Mrs B who took you here for your father?'

'I always wondered if she was paid to keep an eye on me. I had another nurse until Ivan took over and I was brought her. He said she spoiled me. It seems to me, my dear, that our lives are quite similar.'

Lola lifted her glass in agreement.

'Perhaps I was spoiled by material possessions. But, God forbid I should ever have been happy and secure!' he said.

'Mrs Beatty was a wonderful woman,' Lola enthused. 'She never mentioned being paid to look out for you, though, but she must have had some means to stay on The Sands. I just surmised that snippet myself. I am told that I have a very active imagination and once you wrote the letter I thought maybe she had a soft spot for you and that you were in her charge in some way.'

'She was kind to me when she was allowed to be. It's only recently that I've refused to listen to Ivan and his rules. It was Mrs Beatty who helped me gain the confidence to rebel against his tyranny. She made me see that he was an evil man with an unhealthy hold over me.'

'This brandy smells very nice,' Lola said to change the subject. 'To our glorious freedom and good health.'

‘I do enjoy this brandy,’ Mortimer said. ‘Even if it does come from criminal, Fitzgerald hands.’

Lola smiled at the mention of Jack. Both men were jealous of the other. Like children. She removed a forming grin and enjoyed her drink and watched the birds.

‘You must come inside the folly when you’re finished and I can show you my paintings?’ Mortimer said. ‘Although I must tidy up a little. It is very messy. I’m sure you saw what I mean?’

Lola shook her head making out that she had not snooped in the slightest.

‘If Mrs Beatty didn’t tell you about me, then Jack possibly did?’ Mortimer asked. ‘Did he tell you that with Mrs Beatty gone, he will be free to kill me one of these days?’

Lola coughed. The morning brandy and Mortimer’s words went against her breath.

‘Oh yes. Seanín Childs and himself have a nice set-up here and they think I will rat them out,’ Mortimer said with pride. ‘I’d never do that but old Ivan would.’

‘Rat them out?’ Lola asked.

‘Oh yes. They are up to all sorts on the Sands. Fair play to them, I say. Men must make the best of things. I just worry they won’t believe that I’m better as an ally than a corpse. Perhaps you might have a word in Jack’s ear? As I’m not allowed to leave here, I would quite like to sleep easy in my bed. I’d appreciate it if you could ask him to leave me be? I would never speak of their business on the Sands. An odd bottle of this is all I need to remain silent.’

‘Of course I will. Jack wouldn’t want to harm you though. I’d not worry. I cannot believe that he’s that sort of man.’ Lola held her sore collarbone. Mrs Beatty would not have seen this delusional child as a match for her. She had wanted Lola to be a guiding protector. ‘Did you not reassure him yourself that you’re not a threat?’ Lola asked.

‘You know of his illicit business then?’ the Lord of the Sands asked.

Lola got a shiver. She took her time to answer. ‘No, I don’t. I am slowly piecing snippets together. I’m not stupid, but I know very little about Jack C Fitzgerald. Perhaps you’d like to enlighten me?’

‘He’d definitely do me in then. I’m warning you, Mrs de Lacy, he has some very dangerous acquaintances. He’s been sailing close to the wind for the past year especially. Mrs Beatty kept him safe with

her counsel but I fear now he's getting in too deep with sinister forces.'

The brandy was a welcomed warmth.

'I am scaring you?' Mortimer asked.

'No,' Lola said calmly.

'I should be. Promise me that you will be careful, my dear?'

# Chapter 16

Lola had not waited until Jack had gone far. She didn't look out to the boat. Why was she always so stubborn and independent?

'She'll miss you? Is that what she said?' Patrick asked, his eyebrow high. 'What bits of you will she miss the most?'

Jack would normally wish to boast about his time with a woman, but Lola was more than a simple transaction. 'I'll be hurrying back to all of her, I can tell you that much,' Jack replied. 'I tried to be a man, but my belly is tortured at leaving her here.'

'Lord Rockford won't be pleased,' Michael said. 'He was mad as a bull when you had to stay. I thought he was going to burst he was that angry on the sail back with us.'

'Did you see Seanín?' Patrick asked Jack. 'What did he say about the guns?'

'I saw him for a quick minute and nothing more. Lola, I mean Mrs de Lacy was with me. I couldn't speak to him about anything like that.'

'It was just yourself and herself, for almost a week?' Patrick said. 'That was nice, eh?'

'Twas.' Jack scratched under his cap. 'But, I don't think I'll ever understand a woman.'

Patrick laughed long and hard. Michael joined in and added, 'She's causing a bit of stir in the village still.'

'A stir?' Jack asked Michael.

'Well, according to the stories, Lady Rockford and herself were fighting on the lawn of the Big House and there was blood drawn. Then Her Ladyship took sick. The talk is that Mrs de Lacy put a hex on the poor woman to steal His Lordship.'

'Ha!' Jack had his turn to laugh but neither of the other men joined him. 'You cannot be serious?'

Patrick nodded. There was a grave expression on his face as he added, 'She's been branded the worse type of witch you can imagine. I was glad to see she wasn't coming with you. For we've been warned not to help her get safe passage from the island.'

'By who?'

‘Mrs Childs for one!’

‘Should she not want her away from Seanín?’ Jack asked.

‘Sure, there’s neither rhyme nor reason to their ravings,’ Michael said. ‘Mrs de Lacy is safer where she is for the time being anyhow. It’s thought that while she’s out there the sickness will stay away from the mainland. Mrs Childs is up at the chapel lighting candles and saying the rosary, so she believes Seanín is safe enough but if the witch comes ashore, the whole place will come down with the famine and disease again. We didn’t let on that you were with her for fear that you’d be exiled out there forever. If anyone asks you’ve been off seeing a sick relation near Sligo.’

‘Right.’ Jack rubbed his stubble. ‘Is it that bad?’

‘Worse. I’ve never seen such venom,’ Patrick said. ‘I was almost believing it myself. You have to admit that she has a way of taking a hold of ya by the nuts.’ Patrick cupped his crotch. ‘But – I know, too, from seeing her with my own eyes that she’s human and she has a good heart.’

‘Can you not see the mob on the shore?’ Michael said. ‘We told them that we were picking you up down the coast. Let’s hope with this clear day that they haven’t seen the sails on the Sands. They’re keeping a close eye that no raven-haired beauty comes ashore from any vessel. It will be nigh impossible to move any weapons with curious eyes and ears everywhere and Lord Rockford will be coming and going to the island too. How will we do any business at all?’

‘He’s paid up for fortnightly trips out to the Sands,’ Patrick said, squinting into the distance.

‘With us and the *Fair Lass*?’ Jack said. ‘I’m not taking him out there every fortnight!’

‘Arrah, now Jack, you cannot refuse the likes of His Lordship? He’s all paid up and is talking about making a pier. Work is work, my boy!’

Jack spat over the side and asked, ‘Isn’t he worried about this mob on the shore?’

‘When did His Lordship care about what people think? No one would lay a hand on him. And so long as he doesn’t bring the Temptress to the mainland whatever he does on the island will only add to the rumours and to the noose around her pretty neck.’

Jack rubbed his throat and thought of Lola’s fate if people got their hands on her.

‘Look,’ Patrick said and pointed towards the pier. There were

many more people milling about. Even from this distance Jack could see that they were waiting on the *Fair Lass*. ‘They’ll check everything aboard and only then will they be satisfied we aren’t smuggling wanton women.’

Jack tutted like Mrs Beatty did when she disapproved of something. ‘The world has gone mad,’ Jack said. ‘They’ve all gone mad.’

‘Wait until you hear it. There’s no conversation unless it involves cursing the Temptress on the Sands. If they knew you were there alone with her for almost a week, you’d be tarred and feathered, or lose your cock!’ Michael said. ‘Let’s hope Seanín keeps quiet. We might need to give him something to keep him from telling his wife.’

‘I’d be more worried about Ivan or the Lord of the Sands,’ Jack confessed.

‘Neither of them come to the mainland and no one listens to them.’ Patrick was adamant. ‘But keeping up our business with all of this going on is damn nigh impossible. The Brotherhood are not going to listen to our woes about women and witches. They’ll get impatient and want the usual runs to be done in this fine weather. We’ve been fobbing them off with you being away with a sickly relative – but that’s not going to last forever.’

‘It’ll not be long until this all reaches the newspaper. Not that anyone reads it, but once it is in print – word spreads like a fire. We’re going to be questioned about it from those who do read.’

Jack’s stomach growled in hunger and fear. Fear for themselves if things didn’t return to normal, and fear for Lola. The crowd on the shore were jostling for position. There were calls, ‘Who’s on the drontheim, Fitzgeralds?’

Patrick stood firm in the bow. ‘Fuck off the lot of ye! It’s only ourselves returning with Jack, like we said. Now move out of a man’s way. Move, you mad fools!’

‘Have you seen the Temptress?’ a voice called. ‘We will smell her coming, you know. The priest said that the Devil will reek of her. May the Lord save us all from the death she brings!’

Jack hauled at the mainsail and busied himself with settling his boat to the pier-side. He ignored the ranting of the fevered crowd and didn’t listen to their prayers and spat when someone threw holy water at them.

‘I told you it was bad,’ Michael whispered as they elbowed their



way through the throng. 'And there's not one sensible person amongst them. There's no hope. This will not end quickly or well. They have all the time in the world to sit there praying. None of them have any work. The priest comes down three times a day, though, with alms for the righteous.'

Jack shook his head for he couldn't have heard him correctly.

'They bring them coins and food,' Patrick said. 'They're tasked with keeping watch for the Temptress.'

'None of them will go to the Sands though? Will they?' Jack said, looking back at the people. 'None of them would go to harm her out there?'

'Thankfully no. The usual curse remains. Men will become impotent and women barren, if they set foot on the Sands. Also the witch shoots fire from her eyes and has control of the waves.' Michael chuckled slightly. 'Patrick and I agree that she's safe enough out there. For now, at least.'

'Yet Lord Rockford wants us to take him out every two weeks?' Jack asked. 'I need a drink. Did no one tell him that his cock will fail him?'

'He laughed at it all,' Patrick said. 'I did my best to scare him, despite the money. I knew you'd not want me to agree to the work but he was adamant that he's to go to Lola every second Tuesday.'

'Tomorrow's Tuesday,' Jack replied. 'For the love of God, I told Lola I'd be three days! It was going to be hard enough to stick to that, but I was determined I wasn't going running back to her. Tomorrow? I cannot go tomorrow!'

'Let's pray for bad weather then, my boy. Because come hell or high water Lord Rockford will be going to see 'his Lola'.'

“‘His Lola?’” Jack said but Patrick pulled at his sleeve. 'She isn't his,' Jack said quietly.

'She isn't yours either,' Patrick whispered back. 'Now be careful what you say in the public house. You've been away in Sligo remember. Sister of your mother's. I could never stick her so I refused to go. Got that now?'

'Aye,' Jack said and thumped open the door to the public house. Every man inside stopped talking immediately and through the smoke Jack felt all eyes on them. 'Evening,' he said to the room. 'Half of whiskey, please.'

There was the usual conversations about weather and the state of the country under British tyranny. Jack grunted his way through

the first and second whiskey, but when he was on his third he heard, 'What did you make of this Temptress, Jack? Your father and Michael said she was sick on the journey out and that she didn't speak much. Weren't ya lucky she didn't give ye the sickness? Or worse, steal your souls?'

'We're used to disease. We cared for Mrs B and my own mother. Sure we all know women don't survive long on the Sands. I don't know what all the fuss is about. She'll not be out there for long.'

'She better not come back through here!' someone said with vengeance. 'She'll curse us all.'

Jack rolled his eyes and shook his head.

'Don't you agree with us Jack Fitzgerald? Has she bewitched you, the way she did His Lordship? That man left his own dead wife to go straight to her bed!'

Jack opened his mouth and closed it. That was the truth.

'You should refuse to take the Lord out there to that den of sin,' the voice droned on. It was not someone Jack recognised and he refused to look to see who it was. He'd only have to thump the fool.

'Money is money,' Patrick said. 'You'd not turn down good coin either, so less of the nonsense now. We won't need to see the Temptress or have any dealings with her. And it's impossible to say no to His Lordship. We'll do as we are bid and nothing more.'

Jack knocked back the whiskey. It burned his throat, like his silence burned his conscience. He should speak up on Lola's behalf. But what would he say? Everything was being twisted like a straw or flax rope. Usually he enjoyed the banter at the end of the working day. Sometimes he even added to the rumours and he had never been afraid to voice his opinion on most topics. His silence about this would have been noted and whatever he said now would also be remembered. Care was necessary, to shield himself, his family, and even Lola from danger.

'And what was ailing your aunt?' the voice asked.

'Who?' Jack asked before Patrick put pressure on his boot with his own. 'Oh Faye? We never call her Aunt. Father hates the ground she walks on.'

Patrick agreed. 'She's a wagon of a woman.'

'But aye, she's much better. There weren't many womenfolk to care for her. I had to stay longer than expected.'

'I think he met a lass out there in Sligo and he's only making excuses,' Patrick said with a big wink. 'He's been all quiet and

brooding since he came back. I've a feeling there's more women than he was letting on.'

There was a general teasing laughter. Jack's fist clenched and he thumped down the empty whiskey glass. 'I'm away before you start any more mocking.'

There were guffaws and hoots from the men as Jack walked out into the night and up the road to his home. The two-storey townhouse was nothing special but it still smelled of the scent he attributed to his mother. He had no memory of her but once he closed the front door and walked down the narrow hallway and wandered into the parlour, he could normally picture her there knitting. He could sometimes hear her call to him from the downstairs banister and he would leave the second of the two rooms and thump down the thirteen steps to fall into her arms.

That night, though, the air was different and cold. There was no spirit or person within the walls. Jack C Fitzgerald was alone.

# Chapter 17

The fog was thick in the morning and Lola couldn't see the horizon. Smoke from the folly or Childs' hovel was not visible either.

Where did Ivan Tallon dwell? She'd possibly need to know, if she was going to walk about without her pistol. That man unnerved her. Jack had not pointed out his home on their walk. She'd not thought to ask him where it was either. She had been under a haze. A bit like the fog of the morning.

On the beach she wandered, looking for shells to copy the wind-toys Mortimer had. The tinkle of them had brought her peace. He showed her how he made them and suggested she try it.

'A way to pass the time until your pirate Jack returns,' he said, grinning.

Lola enjoyed her time with the young fellow and felt that despite his obvious eccentricities, he had a sincerity that would not allow him to hide his true good nature. He wished to be different from Ivan and his father. That was commendable but he was as deeply scarred by his mentor. He talked of little else. 'Jack might murder Ivan before me. That is my only consolation,' he said.

Lola gazed at the smoky clouds blanketing the seawater lake. Jack was no murderer. But she wasn't sure of how to convince Mortimer of this. Perhaps years of resentment would not be as easily shifted as the fog. A large wind was clearing the waves and Lola was sure she could see red sails. The *Fair Lass*? It couldn't be. Jack had been adamant that it would be three days. She had rationed her supplies accordingly.

Mortimer suggested she ask for a goat, pig and hens. His were thriving with no fox or wild dog to maim or eat them. She had only started to make her list of wants. As she peered at the dispersing mists, there was a shout from the boat. It was Lord Rockford's voice. Fredrick was back already.

Normally, her heart would leap for a man with wealth coming to see her, but at the bow of the drontheim stood a figure she knew would not be pleased to be returning in this manner.

Lola waved. The man seated waved, but Jack didn't. Then the

slight man on the tiller waved too. Michael. Sweet Michael.

Fredrick called to her again but she couldn't make out the words. The girl in her should run to the rocky platform and take the wealthy patron in her arms, but with Jack there she wasn't sure what she should do next. She would return to the cottage and wait for her visitors. This dilemma was exhausting.

She sat in the middle of the dunes and prayed to Mrs Beatty's spirit. 'Guide me. Guide me.'

A distinguished lady would get ready to receive her guests. She would fix her hair and calmly greet the men.

Lola got up and headed for the cottage. A red-setter dog was already there to lick her wrist and shortly after, there was the clip-clop of the Lord's boots on the flagstones. 'Lola?' he was calling. 'Lola?'

He was bald without a wig or hat. She always preferred him like this. Fredrick Rockford was a fine fit man for his forty-four years. He had a handsome smile and a cheeky glint in those blue eyes. He held her and kissed her neck. It hurt and she winced.

'That's where she maimed me.' Lola squirmed free.

'I am sorry,' he scoffed, bemused that she left his arms. 'You are much better though? You look well.'

'A little. I am still tired and quite weak.'

'You have a lovely shade on your cheeks. Did you see Mortimer in the sea?'

'Not today,' Lola admitted. She had slept in. 'I visited his folly yesterday. It is a pity of the boy. He should not be prisoner here.'

Fredrick looked around. 'Do you feel trapped? I've brought you a few things. The men are coming with them now.'

'And you couldn't carry anything yourself?' Lola asked, going to the door and opening it.

'When did a gentleman need to carry things? I cannot stay long but I wanted to start with our plans for making this place prettier.'

'I might leave the Sands...' Lola started. She'd not thought once about leaving so where this came from shocked her as well. 'I know you promised to look about my welfare. But, I think I should take Mortimer and go from here.'

'What?' Fredrick's face bloated out over his necktie and high collar. 'And go where?'

'I don't know. I wasn't expecting you. I thought I had time to make my own plans.'

‘Your own plans?’ he said as if a woman should never have such aspirations. ‘Take Mortimer? Take him how?’

‘Fredrick, he’s not a boy. I meant take him out off this prison.’

‘You cannot go anywhere. For one thing, there’s a mob on the shore looking for your blood.’

‘Ha!’ Lola said, then saw Fredrick’s face. ‘You’re serious?’

‘I am. We had to fight our way through the crowds to get into the boat and the Fitzgeralds were even spat upon. Thankfully, they thought better of doing that to a man with the ear of the crown.’

Lola flopped onto the wonky stool. ‘Why are they like that?’ she asked. ‘Let me guess, Mrs Childs and her ilk who’ve never met me have decided that I am a harlot?’

‘You *are* a harlot, my dear.’

‘This is only the second time there was a mob waiting to lynch me for it!’

‘That will keep you here,’ he said and his tone was pleased. ‘I know I sound happy about that. But that’s because I am. I want you here with me.’

‘But I’m not with you! I’m here and you are in Rockford House. Are you going to stay on the Sands? Here?’

Fredrick moved his nose in disgust.

‘I see that you won’t be. Therefore, you are not with me!’

Lola never shouted. Ever. He stood speechless.

There was a slight knock to the open door and Patrick’s tanned face appeared. He winked. Lola couldn’t help but smile. He beckoned and pointed to the packages. Michael grinned and placed two chairs next to them.

‘Thank you.’ Lola touched the large parcels and a case. She peeked into some of the paper wrapping and it smelt of woollen goods.

‘More clothes, some good wine and food. Chairs and some more warm blankets and we’ve a surprise,’ Patrick said in Irish. He disappeared off down the path. Lord Rockford went out to lean on the door of the cottage.

After a few seconds, they heard the bleating of a goat and saw Patrick muscling a kid up the path with a rope harness. ‘Polly,’ Patrick said as he presented it to Lola. Taking the rope, Lola looked past Patrick but the path was empty. No Jack. Michael bounded towards her with a bundle of letters tied in string.

‘Letters,’ he said in English and ruffled the goat’s head. ‘Slán.’

‘Tea?’ Lola called after the men. ‘Tar ar ais. Come back.’

The men did come back and Lola let go of Polly’s rope. ‘Where will I put her?’ she asked Patrick. With half an hour of grunting and slurping at the mugs of tea, the two men under Lola’s directing put up a makeshift pen with bits of the old cupboard Lola had them move outside. Fredrick sat on one of his own chairs looking increasingly angry.

‘Time to go on the next tide and Jack is waiting in the boat,’ Lola said to Lord Rockford and his dog. ‘The boys are ready now and I can unload all of these supplies. Thank you.’

‘I’ve been looking at this place and it is bleak. But, we will make it homely. Come give me a kiss. I need one.’

Lola glanced out the door. The others were away already with a wink from Patrick and a blushing goodbye from Michael but Lola grimaced. ‘The men might see us...’

‘When did that ever stop you?’ Fredrick asked, amused. ‘You are still weak. I can tell. But, is something else wrong?’ He patted the chair beside him. ‘Sit on your fine, new chair.’

Lola smiled. ‘I thought I might start afresh. A brush with death does that, you know. I fancy a change in my life.’

‘A change? How?’

‘I’m not sure.’ Lola met his gaze. ‘I’m grateful for the gifts but...’

‘Has this epiphany something to do with Jack Fitzgerald?’ Fredrick asked, watching her reaction closely. ‘He has played nursemaid and is in foul humour and wouldn’t come ashore.’

‘This is about no one else. Just me,’ Lola said. ‘I’ve realised that I deserve to be happy. Everyone does. Perhaps the Sands is where I need to be for now. I spent my life trying to make others content. I just want some peace and quiet. But something needs to be done about Mortimer.’

‘How can I help?’ Fredrick asked. ‘I promised you when you were delirious that if you came back to me, I would make you happy. I’ll keep my word.’ He had her hands in his warm ones. Lola’s head hurt. For many years, she had waited on a man with the means to say such things. ‘What will make you happy?’

‘That is what I need time to discover.’ Lola thought for an instant and added, ‘One thing is that I need you to be good to your son.’

‘I see,’ he said, rubbing her fingers with his own. This was where he would start to seduce her slowly. Lola took her hands back.

‘You do know that you are not my wife and I could never marry you,’ he said forcefully. ‘I thought you of all people would understand that.’

‘I don’t need you to propose marriage!’ Lola got up and walked around. ‘Gracious! I’ve not lost my mind entirely. This is about what I want – not what you or other men desire.’

‘Your options are few. You shouldn’t want too much. If you do, you’ll be disappointed.’ Fredrick’s brow creased and his mouth pursed. ‘I sound harsh but look around you, my darling.’

‘Get out!’ Lola shouted. ‘Get out! There is nothing worse than a man thinking he can take advantage of a woman when she is powerless! OUT!’ The Lord got up quietly and used that superior way he had to put on his gloves.

Lola roared again and startled the dog. ‘OUT! Leave.’ The poker made a good weapon as her pistol was under her pillow and even for her it was a bit extreme. Lola threw objects at men. She rarely shot at them.

‘When my Lola returns and finds her good sense – I shall be back,’ the Lord said, bowing low. Lola considered cracking the poker across his skull but he looked at her with such sincere care that she lowered her arm. ‘Don’t leave the island. It’s not safe. That’s all I ask of you – for now,’ Fredrick said. ‘Don’t leave it or try to. It’s dangerous.’ With a dip of his bald head out under the low door lintel he and the dog were gone.

Lola uncorked the green bottle of poteen and took a swig. ‘Thank you for your help, Mrs B. Thank you,’ she whispered.



# Chapter 18

As he waited on the lord to take him from the island Jack whittled a full angel for his collection and carved her wings. Jack refused to leave the boat and the time the others took ashore seemed very long. His mood was foul and getting worse. Michael and Patrick returned and Jack almost burst a blood vessel as the lord was not with them. All was lost until Patrick said, 'Lola was angry. There was no sign of love between them. Hold your nerve, son. Hold fast.'

Jack almost hugged his father.

'We made a pen for the goat and she barely spoke to him.'

'She didn't pay him any attention?' Jack asked but the dog leapt into the boat and the lord returned looking like thunder.

Jack was in the clouds. Lola had rejected the lord's advances. It was obvious.

The lord's demeanour was agitated and he took his frustrations out on the dog. He kicked it twice to sit quietly. Jack called the dog to him and petted him with one hand while shifting the mainsail rope with the other. 'Whist now. You're safe. We're together,' he told the beautiful animal. The dog responded to his touch and Jack saw his passenger's annoyance rise even higher. The day was good after all.

'She didn't even ask for you, Jack,' Lord Rockford said once they were sailing back to the mainland. 'You'd think she'd inquire after the man who was so good to her during her illness? But no. Not one question as to where you were or how your health was.'

Jack grunted and petted on at the dog.

'And you didn't want to go ashore? Did you not want to see her?'

Jack's breath held. No answer would be enough.

'Perhaps you two had a falling out? She seemed angry and not herself at all. She said that men always were taking advantage of her. Did you take advantage of her frailty, Mr Fitzgerald?'

'I did not!' Jack said quickly, but guilt rose in his cheeks. He feared that he might have preyed on her vulnerability but that was until he recalled that it was Lola who mounted him. 'As you say,

she's not given me a second thought since I left. She didn't mean that it was me who was taking advantage, Your Lordship.'

'Do you doubt my word?' The lord's voice was as high as his temper. His voice trembled.

'I think Mrs de Lacy is a fine woman.'

'A fine woman! Ha! Do you know her profession? Did you not see the crowds on the pier? A fine woman would not start riots. Lola causes trouble wherever she goes. I know a great deal about that woman out there.' His finger pointed back towards the Sands.

Jack gulped. Did he want to provoke a man of power right now when things were on a knife-edge? God help him, he really wanted to see the man in pain. He wanted to toss him overboard. Him and his finery were becoming tiresome.

Instead, Jack mustered patience and said, 'I know Your Lordship is grieving for his wife and is worried, too, about Mrs de Lacy's safety. Considering it was you who brought her here, I can see why you'd feel responsible. But, she's a brave lady. Don't fret. All will be well.' Jack nodded to emphasise his words.

Patrick raised a curious eyebrow as to what was unfolding. The sound of the wind and waves drowned out the exchange, even if the English was fully understood. Jack ignored his enquiring eyes.

Lord Rockford sat forward. 'She is recovering and worried about her future. I suppose she has every right to be angry and afraid. She'll come around. Women always do. Once I start work on the wharf and fixing up her cottage, she'll see who is good to her.'

Jack nodded and gritted his teeth.

'We didn't see the Lord of the Sands,' Patrick said in clear, loud English. He was reminding the lord of another eligible man on the Sands. Jack winked his thanks. It took five minutes for the bait to be nibbled.

'This Lord of The Sands, how old is he now?' Lord Rockford asked.

'Man big,' Patrick said. 'Cock-mór.' Patrick did the necessary mime with his elbow and formed fist. 'Big. Very big.'

Jack had to hide his laugh in his sleeve. His father and himself were a good team. Jack needed to be the better man now. For things to progress there were always sacrifices. Jack clapped his father's back when they moved near each other. It was a traditional sign of affection.

'There's nothing I can do about the Lord of the Sands. That

young fellow doesn't know what to do with a woman though? How would he?' the Lord said.

Jack coughed and agreed. 'Aye! He's not seen many women. We're almost at Rockford pier. Sorry your feet got wet on the passage out. The jetty will make a big difference to the Sands, sir. It's a good plan. I'd like to offer our services with the planning, building and supply of provisions.'

'That goes without saying, Fitzgerald. Have you any of that fine brandy? We can shake hands on the shore and make progress for us both.'

Jack heaved on the rope and closed his eyes. Lola was there in the blackness.

When the drontheim was moored the crowds ashore took the guilt away and added in a dash of fear. Their voices were louder than ever and the lord was jostled and poked. His anger made him lash out and the dog ran off in fright.

'Sit into the carriage,' he ordered at Jack. The smell inside was of leather and spice. The seats were red velvet. Lola had sat on this seat. Jack's fingers grazed over the soft fabric as the lord spelt out his ambitions. They weren't large but for Jack they were sensible. It would take weeks, perhaps months to construct the wharf and fix up the Beatty cottage.

'We'll need the *Fair Lass*,' the lord said, 'exclusively.'

Jack listened to the trundling wheels moving them off from the noise of the crowd. The bumps in the road shook his guilt. His silence was considered, 'good bargaining tactics'. Instead of speaking, Jack sniffed the air in the carriage. Lola had been here yet he couldn't smell her. He was without her. With each handshake, he lost a little bit more dignity. He was losing Lola to Lord Fredrick Rockford so that he might get coin.

And, Lola wasn't Jack's to sell.

Yet each agreement on the work felt like a nail in a coffin for them. He was burying their love with each smile and spit on his palm to seal the deals. He was stealing Lola's future. Jack held his hand to his mouth. He wanted to vomit.

'You Fitzgeralds are right to take this opportunity now for I'd only be looking for someone else who would step in. Don't make me regret employing an Irishman for this job. And mark my words, if this goes well, it is the start of great things to come. I'm a good patron to have.'

Jack heard himself make promises and commitments. He sounded glad that Lola would be the lord's. Everything was breaking.

He tried to put it into context as he watched the sunlight through the passing trees. This way, his family had the commission and regular excuses to be on the Sands and he could protect Lola. She was a woman of the world and had promised to make things work. They would figure it all out somehow – together. Lola was a survivor and so was Jack.

As the carriage circled back a mile to drop him on the outskirts of the village, Jack said, 'It's a man's world indeed, Your Lordship. This is good business. I'll not let you down. If I find the dog I'll keep it for you.' There was chatter about the future of the island and their ventures together. Jack should have been pleased.

As he descended the steps of the carriage, Lord Rockford clapped his back.

When the carriage drove out of sight, Jack fell to knees in the dirt. What had he done?

# Chapter 19

There was need to make a routine to curb the loneliness. Waking earlier than even the Lord of the Sands, Lola found a tiny track of the stream where she was shielded by trees for some of her own type of naked bathing and scrubbing of undergarments. The heather held the fragile fabrics well so that they could dry. She sauntered home and then gathered them after her morning of chores. She then settled into an afternoon of sketching on the beach where the sun warmed her mood. Her first full evening alone was enchanting. The rustle of the trees, the crackle of the fire and the jumping of flames and shadows. Lola danced alone, reminiscing about the splendour she witnessed in the past. Missing it seemed silly when she was safer now than she'd ever been. She hugged her shoulders and danced on to the music inside her head.

The following day took a similar pattern, but instead of being alone in the afternoon she went for a walk towards the Lord of the Sands's folly. There were angry voices on the breeze as she made it to the avenue of oak saplings. On further listening, she realised it was not two voices, but possibly three. All were distinct and raised in anger. What they were arguing about was hard to hear.

She stopped and turned to get her pistol from under her skirts. She listened again. The voices had stopped. Then there was a low, long whistle and the call, 'Mrs de Lacy. Don't go.'

Lola saw Mortimer and he beckoned to her in a friendly way. She obeyed with a wave. He was set out to greet her in a charming outfit of tailored jacket, gilded waistcoat and three-quarter-length trousers with black stockings. A red necktie curled and knotted expertly under his shaved chin. What a fine young man he was. His father would regret this alienation of him. Lola just knew he would.

Mrs Beatty had definitely brought Lola here to rectify this injustice. Lola would do all she could to help the Lord of the Sands reunite with his father. The young man's smile was sweet and his low bow was gracious. His silken black hair was tied with a red ribbon. His dimples were pronounced and pretty. 'Welcome, my lady.' He kissed her hand.

‘You look so well, Mortimer,’ Lola said. ‘But I heard angry voices? I was about to look out my pistol.’

‘I speak to myself I’m afraid,’ Mortimer said, moving them both inside the folly. He had cleared space for them both to sit. The smoke was gone and the air inside was clear. Fresh flowers sat in a large vase and he went to the gleaming crystal decanter and poured them two stiff brandies. ‘I have been lonely all my life. I’ve learned to have imaginary friends and foes. It’s the madness of being alone here, I suppose.’

Lola was glad of the glass and dipped her nose inside it. It was an odd thing to talk to yourself in different voices, but Lola left that alone.

‘Don’t worry. I’m really quite sane,’ he said. ‘Well, at least Mrs Beatty thought I was. I miss her desperately. I’m glad that you’re here. I was going to visit but thought I should ask you a time that suited us both. Isn’t that what mannered people arrange?’

Lola held her forehead and sniffed back emotion.

‘I’ve upset you?’ he said, pulling a linen kerchief from his waistcoat pocket. ‘Your letters to old Mrs B were such fun. I read them to her in the evenings. I felt like I was in another world without leaving my prison. You lived such a gay life and we were jealous. You’re an unusual woman. Mrs Beatty was so proud of you. I hope you know that?’

This poor man, and there was no more Mrs B for them both to love. It was making Lola emotional. Since she’d set foot on this island, she’d cried at nothing at all. Lola let the tears fall.

‘Oh my! You’ll make me blubber now too.’ Mortimer moved towards the door, himself overcome and gulping back sadness. It took a few minutes for them both to compose themselves. Mortimer took the seat opposite her and said, ‘We were afraid that our letters would be read and destroyed if we said anything of value. I’m still surprised that they even got off the island. I write regularly to my father, but he never replies. I wonder if Ivan intercepts them. You might use your influence with Jack Fitzgerald and see if he does indeed bring them to the mainland as instructed? I’d be most grateful.’

‘Of course! No one should tamper with your correspondence.’

‘They do, I’m afraid. My father wouldn’t abandon me here for twenty years, especially when I’ve recently started writing monthly about my despair.’ Mortimer drummed his fingers on the knee. ‘I

asked Mrs Beatty to sign a few to him, but we still got no reply. Mrs B promised me that you'd know what to do.'

Lola sighed.

'I know that a gentleman should be more discreet and less forward, but I've spent my life being patient. It is time for change. Tell me everything about yourself,' he said, grinning and expectant.

'Can I ask about you instead? I'm not good with questions. For many years I've shielded myself from the truth. I want to help you, Mortimer. I truly do. But, I'm not sure how I can do that.'

The handsome fellow swallowed and looked out the window. 'The rain has started. You will stay until it stops?'

Lola sipped the delicious brandy and nodded. 'Of course. I'll be glad to stay a while. The sheep were still up the hillocks, on my way here, so it shouldn't last long. But I will stay. Tell me, Mortimer, what do you know about your situation? What do you know about your mother?'

Mortimer held his necktie and spoke with a furrowed brow. 'She was not a lady. A servant, I believe. Ivan Tallon's unwed sister. My father, Lord Rockford took a shine to her youthful beauty. I don't even know her name. Nothing. Mrs Beatty did some investigating on my behalf but she found out very little. As wonderful as Mrs B was, we both know that she wasn't a woman of means or status. A bit like my own mother. But, Mrs B cradled me in her arms like I asked her to. She taught me what it was like to be loved. I'm going to cry again. Gracious me.'

'She loved us both.' Lola leaned forward and held his shaking arm on the chair in front of her. 'We were both lucky to have her in our lives. She was a powerful woman who had no power at all.'

'That's it exactly.' Mortimer smiled and clasped a hand over hers. 'She promised me that you'd understand and that we'd be like siblings. I dared to dream and here you are.'

'That is beautiful. Can I be your sister? No man has ever asked that of me before.'

Mortimer was overcome again. His mouth opened and closed with a tremble of his chin. He squeezed hard on Lola's hand.

'I will ask Jack about your letters. Did you not give them to him directly?' Lola asked. 'I hope that my own correspondence will not be defiled. I know a great many people with knowledge about the aristocracy both here in Ireland and abroad so I will also try to find out about your mother.'

‘Thank you,’ Mortimer breathed out. Relief and gratitude flooded his eyes. ‘Might you have sway with my father at all?’ Mortimer stopped talking and drank some more.

Lola considered her reply. ‘Your father, Lord Rockford is a patron of the arts.’ Lola pointed around the room. ‘That is possibly where you get your artistic abilities from.’

‘Do you think he’d like my work?’ Mortimer jumped up and rifled through papers and then canvases, thrusting examples aloft and shouting about what inspired them. Lola sat and listened, worried for the man. He was manic. Lovably damaged. She wished to fix him and mend his broken spirit.

‘In this light, I must draw and paint you! Please let me? You can talk to me as I do it. I’ve seen you sketching on the beach. I didn’t want to interrupt but now I want to stop you doing anything, until I capture your likeness. Don’t move,’ Mortimer suggested. But he didn’t wait on permission and flustered about until he was positioned with charcoal and large sketching paper and board.

‘What beauty,’ he said as Lola relaxed into the chair.

It had been a long time since she had a portrait done. There were many more bridges crossed and many wrinkles hatched.

‘We could send this to my father,’ he whispered, again not asking for permission. ‘A gift from us both.’

Lola touched her neck, thinking that Fredrick didn’t deserve a gift from his abandoned son.

‘Smile and talk to me,’ Mortimer ordered. ‘Please. Trust me. I’m your new brother after all.’

There was scratching and smudging movements and still Lola couldn’t speak.

‘I’ve read your letters, remember, there will be little to shock me. I know you. Or I feel that I do. I know you think you’re a harlot like everyone says, but to me you are magnificent! I used to talk to Mrs Beatty for hours. But nothing that has happened to me here is anything like your life. Mrs Beatty told me about your flight to France as a child. The murder of your mother. The debauchery of your father. Your life as a dancer and courtesan. Your marriage and escape from your terrible relations. She talked at length about their ill treatment of you both and of her pride at you breaking free. I didn’t think to ask how you managed it. It gave me hope. Smile. I need to you to smile for the portrait. There. That’s it.’

He looked like his father when he angled his head that way to



concentrate.

‘You’re ruining your clothes,’ Lola pointed out when Mortimer had cleaned his hands for the fifth time on his front.

Without hesitation, he removed his garments. It became obvious why the Lord of the Sands liked to remain undressed. His art dirtied his clothes. While Lola wondered how he had clean clothes to wear at all. She watched the young man as he continued drawing with great enthusiasm.

‘Are you happy, sister?’ he asked when Lola started to hum a little tune. ‘I hope that myself and the Sands make you happy?’

Lola’s eyes fell to the naked artist who was now her brother and she laughed heartily again.

## Chapter 20

Lola's beauty did not greet Jack's berthing on the Sands. With his head down, determined, Jack climbed ashore. It had been arranged that Patrick and Michael would anchor off the lighthouse and wait for Seanín to row out to them for a much-needed meeting. Jack would have at least an hour alone with Lola.

But, when Jack got to the cottage, it was empty. The half-door laid open at the top and the place was tidy but there was no Lola. The goat bleated at Jack as he called in the yard and then along the shore. Lola was possibly at the folly. If Jack wanted to see her, then he would have to brave the place.

Did she not remember that he was arriving back today? Why was his woman never waiting on him on the shore with a wave or a welcoming gesture?

There wasn't much time to spare, the others would be back before long.

Then and there he stood stock still. He could not be seeing what he was before him.

Lola was draped over a couch with her breasts bare and a cloak shielding her lower modesty and the naked Lord of The Sands wiggled as he painted her onto the large canvas.

It was Lola who saw Jack first. She held up her hand and Mortimer turned around. How pleased with himself he looked. Jack was beyond angry. His Lola, was like this – on a couch – in the late morning. Brandy tainted the air. His brandy!

'Jack,' Lola called, still not moving to dress herself or cover her bosoms. 'You're back.'

Jack folded his arms and stepped in the open door. 'I'm back. I...' He saw the creation on the canvas and it was a remarkable likeness. It took his breath to look at it. Lola finally moved from the couch and covered herself in a robe. There was shuffle from the artist and trousers were found and pulled on.

'Do you like it?' Lola asked, for Jack was still staring at the painting. 'I'm not allowed to see it, until it is finished. That's if I don't die with curiosity first. It is good to see you, Jack C

Fitzgerald, even if you look so thunderously jealous.'

'Don't be concerned, Jack,' Mortimer said, heaving on a shirt with frills. 'We've agreed to be siblings for now. Lola is now my sister.'

Jack squinted at them both. His woollen jumper and new britches were suddenly exceptionally warm and uncomfortable.

'She's to help me and I'm painting her and making her rest. Don't look at me with such murderous intent. Despite our nakedness, her virtue is quite safe.' Mortimer went to the decanter. 'Brandy?' he asked without looking at Jack.

'I'll have another please,' Lola said and held an empty glass out to Mortimer.

What were the two of them playing at? Jack wouldn't and couldn't think of it.

'Can I ask you to take some letters back with you to the mainland, please?' Lola asked.

Jack tried to look less startled and the brandy helped. 'Of course,' he grunted.

'Do you always deliver Mortimer's ashore? Are they intercepted?' Lola asked without flinching.

'What kind of a man do you think I am?' Jack snapped. 'I...' He stopped, for of course, there were times when Ivan had taken the bundle from the box in the boat. Both coming and going from the island, he was always very interested in the paper deliveries and the correspondence. 'Ivan did take some of them away though. But that was years ago now when he was the one paying the messengers. But since you've been handing me things yourself, I am fulfilling all the duties that I am paid for. I can promise you that.'

'Good,' Mortimer said. 'Thank you for your honesty, Mr Fitzgerald.'

'I apologise for Ivan taking them. I never thought that it was more curtailing of your freedom.' Jack left down his glass and looked around. 'I didn't give it much thought. I always presumed you had everything I lacked. Did Lola tell you that your father is going to make us a wharf on the island, to make sure he has a swift, safe, dry passage out here?'

Was that emotion in Lola's eyes? He couldn't take it whatever it was, it pierced his heart. He glanced at the hopping birds outside.

'I see,' Mortimer finally said to break the silence. 'And how do you feel about that, sister?'

Lola pulled the robe tighter. 'I can see that my permission has not been fully sought in this transaction. I had not decided what I wanted and yet it seems that people are organising things regardless. It also seems that Jack C Fitzgerald is going to build his jetty that will bring His Lordship here regularly. That shouldn't surprise me – but it does. How do you feel, Mortimer?'

'Well...He's not coming to see me,' he replied with surprisingly little emotion.

'You will no doubt strike a good bargain with him when he does come here, Lola,' Jack added in haste.

'You've already yours struck!' Lola added, knocking the last of the brandy in her glass into her mouth. 'Cover the canvas, Mortimer. I'm leaving now and I don't want to peek. I'm a woman of my word. I will carry my clothes and return this robe tomorrow around the same time as today?'

'Of course.' Mortimer stood aside and let his muse past him.

Jack stood, too, and his fingers itched to reach for her wrist to stop her, but they were not alone and he resisted. Instead, Jack drank the brandy and watched Lola leave the folly. Once she was out of earshot and well past the saplings swaying in the wind, Jack cursed.

'She is an amazing woman,' Mortimer said, cleaning one of his many soiled paintbrushes. 'Do I need to defend my life now that we are alone?'

Jack was taken aback.

'I know about your activities on the Sands. Ivan has talked about little else for years. I know you think of me as the enemy, but I would never divulge anything about your weapons or smuggling to anyone outside of here. I am a man of honour. There is no need for me to be a rat. I could be an excellent ally, if only you'd realise it.'

The child Jack loathed was gone. When Jack took a long, hard look at the man and the situation before him, there was a ring of sense to his statement.

'I do need your help,' Jack said and coughed for that was exceptionally hard to admit. 'You seem to have a rapport with Lola. I could do with help managing her.'

Mortimer laughed for too long. 'Sorry,' he said in a final chuckle. 'I think the main problem with that is – that even I know that no one can "manage" a woman like Lola.'

'That's true.' Jack smiled in spite of himself. 'But, I do not want

your father coming here. There, I've said it. You can laugh again at me now.'

'I totally understand that. And in many ways neither do I. This is my island, and he's not made any effort to make my life here better. He didn't even come to see me when he was visiting Lola!' Mortimer said flatly while refilling both their glasses. 'You've not been able to do your business with the mob on the pier day and night and now if he arrives here more often, there's a bit too much light being shone on the Sands – oh, and of course, there are your feelings for Lola now too.'

Jack sat with a flop onto the ornate couch. He ran his fingers over the brocade design.

'It is a predicament,' Mortimer continued. 'Especially if he is going to fund the building of the pier on the Sands. It is most needed.'

'Aye.'

'I never needed such a project. I've wanted to leave here for my entire life and permanent structures don't interest me. I know I shall find a way to escape soon and I never wanted others here. Other men that is. For that is all that would come. Women are too afraid to stay. Lola is different and she is my angel. And I couldn't face more brutes who would threaten me or her.'

A tinge of guilt rose in Jack. 'Could you finance such a pier if you wanted to?' Jack asked, leaning on his elbows.

'Of course not. I rely on whatever scraps my father throws my way. Anyhow, I want away from here and he's not building anything to come see me.'

Jack sat back and said, 'Aye, but we should protect Lola. I should be the man to do that. However, I can't. My family needs this work and they will not hear of me letting it go. Someone else would step into our shoes and your beast of a father would still be able to reach Lola.'

'She doesn't seem averse to his advances,' Mortimer said and then held up a defensive hand. 'But, I can see from your reaction that you are very averse to such arrangements. Oh dear me. This is a bit of a bind.'

'It is.' Jack swallowed the large brandy in two mouthfuls. 'What am I to do now?'

'Are you in love with her?'

Jack pulled at the collar of his work shirt. It itched when he was

under pressure and now he was extremely stressed. 'Did she not mention me at all to you? Did she tell you what she thinks of me?' Jack asked. 'Please, tell me what she said.'

'My good man, she never mentioned you. It was all about my past and Mrs Beatty.'

'She'll tell me nothing about herself.' Jack was almost shouting. 'I get one question a day!'

'Lola enjoys her little games. I'm not allowed to talk to myself anymore and she only allows me one moan per visit and I'm not allowed to mention the schoolmaster at all now. I am finding it very beneficial. She is good with people, don't you think?'

'Did she not give any idea of what she feels about being here? Of her illness? Or me?'

'I've found Lola will only speak if she is ready to do so. I've tried to ask her about my own father and she is tight-lipped. Let me think about your dilemma. I would like to help.' Mortimer held out his hand. 'Let us be allies, Jack Fitzgerald.'

Jack spat on his palm and pumped the man's hand. 'And you give me your word that you'll not try to seduce Lola de Lacy?'

'I give you my word,' Mortimer replied. 'But, I cannot promise that she will not seduce me.'

# Chapter 21

It didn't take Lola long to hear Jack's footsteps coming up the cottage's path. She was feeding Polly some scraps and she caught the sleeve of Mortimer's flowing robe in a rusty nail from the old cupboard that was now Polly's pen. The tearing sound made her curse.

Jack took a look as she held her arm aloft. 'If you can sew, it is fixable,' he said.

Lola yanked her arm free. If she could sew she wouldn't have needed to sell herself – she'd have been a seamstress. But instead of giving him the confirmation that she was a paid harlot, she stomped into the house.

'Miss me?' he called, stepping in and lowering his head to get under the lintel. 'The men will be back with the *Fair Lass* shortly. I came to tell you that the deals have been made and to warn you that we'll be starting on the work soon.'

'You've told me that already. Why rub salt into the wound and follow me here to tell me again?'

'I thought that you might have something to say to me.'

'You two men will have shaken on it by now,' she said, ignoring him standing closer and closer still. 'No one cares about what I have to say or how I feel.'

'I care,' Jack said, cornering her next to the dresser. 'I care.'

Lola would not look at that handsome face or give in to his wanting her. No matter what he said, she would not give in.

'Of all people, you should know that I shook his hand out of ambition. Like you – I don't want to have to beg for my living,' Jack pleaded with her. 'I thought if anyone would understand that it would be you.'

'And you don't care if he is able to come here and ask me to be his mistress again? You are helping the man! You don't care if you make it easier for him to come here all the time?'

Jack leaned even closer. 'I do care,' he whispered and made goose pimples rise on her skin.

'You make your money,' Lola said. 'You knew what would

happen when you agreed to build his wharf. You aren't a fool, Jack. Don't pretend to be shocked now about what will happen next.'

'You can refuse him. You can say no to his advances.'

'And why would I do that?' Lola asked, finally looking up into those blue eyes. 'You didn't.'

'I'm not sleeping in his bed.' Jack stopped and wiped a hand across his jaw. 'You can say no to him.'

'Why would I?' Lola said, gripping the edge of the dresser and turning her back on Jack. She'd seen enough of him. 'How will I do that now that you've made everything so easy for him?'

'Between us we'll think of something,' Jack said, standing directly behind her. 'He won't be back for a week or more. We'll figure it out.'

'And when are we going to come up with this brilliant plan?'

'I could stay. If you asked me to.'

'Stay here? Now?' Lola asked, still not giving in to turn around.

'Yes.' Those hands she wished for went to her shoulders and his mouth nestled in to nuzzle at the curve of her neck. His breath and moustache tickled and a shiver ran through her.

There was a kiss, a light peck, an open-mouthed lovely slurp and Lola let go of the front of her robe. With one swipe of the fabric Jack's fingers exposed her shoulder and he kissed there while his hand unveiled the other. The silken fabric dropped between them.

Jack inhaled and said, 'I need you. I want to be gentle. Teach me.'

Arms encircled and dragged her back against that hard chest and scratchy jumper. The bulge of him was large and hands found breasts. They kneaded softly. Jack was taking his time with his exploration, looking down and over her shoulder at his movements. 'You are so beautiful.' The rough palm sunk past her belly button and delved into hair. A finger, then two, found wetness. Lola held her breath. She wouldn't pant or show this overwhelming desire. No. The slide was rhythmic and she arched her neck and back. 'Nice?' he asked. She nodded and turned to face him. With his hand removed he placed it to a cheek and she smelt him and her scent mingled as they kissed.

There was nothing but his clothes between them when Lola heard a familiar voice. Jack broke free of her mouth and spun around, his arms wide to try to shield her from the open door. The language was Irish and it was being shouted at a fierce volume and



pace. Patrick, Jack's father was angry. Very. There were words of warning about witches.

She bent for her robe but Jack was standing on it. She heaved it and the rip gave way entirely. The sound screeched through the tension and Jack moved his large boots to follow his father.

Lola found a chemise and blouse and pulled them on listening to the raised voices outside. She thought about going out, too, for many minutes and just as she was looking for her boots, Jack returned red-faced.

'They're gone,' he said.

'Good,' she replied willing him to kiss her again. 'Take off your clothes for God's sake.'

He pulled off his woollen jumper, then let go of the braces which held his wide britches up and stood out of them. With one pull he popped all his shirt buttons and stood there in only his working boots.

He was risen for Lola. It was difficult to see anything else.

'Now what?' he said.

'Come here,' she beckoned. There was a tearing of more fabric from Lola's body and the chemise got rolled upwards. They shuffled backwards in unison towards the mattress and fell onto it kissing wildly.

The slide of his chest against her breasts made Lola moan and then his fingers found the wetness again.

'Rub me,' she urged and for agonisingly good seconds he did just that. 'Put in your fingers in there.'

The sucking sound he was making moving in and out was almost as good as the feeling.

'Like that?' he asked.

'Yes, yes, yes.' She pawed his back until he was between her thighs and on top of her. Jack smelled of the sea and Lola closed her eyes and said, 'I need your cock.'

Jack tilted himself up and against her opening and she urged him to enter with an encouraging hand positioning his tip closer still. The thrust from Jack was an insistent slow and gentle one. In and out. In. In further. Out slowly. Lola's breasts heaved under his weight to breathe, move, and moan. In and out. In. In further. Out slowly.

Her hands could not reach his tight bottom from that angle and she needed him to take her harder. She whispered, 'More' and

kissed his ear, sucking the lobe and breathing heavily.

‘Not yet,’ he insisted.

This slow gentle love-making was bliss but made her weak.

In. In further. Out. Back in. In deeper. He took her over and over and she groaned with him.

‘Harder now?’ he asked doing just that in the same rhythm.

‘That. Is. Perfect. More.’

Her words had the desired effect so she said the same thing over and over. Jack moved faster, longer, and harder.

Lola urged for ‘More’ whenever she could and the banging of the bed was all that distracted her from panting to a finish when he did. Listening to him come to her and feeling him fill her, made Lola reach her peak too. That had never happened to her before when a man penetrated her. Never. This was new.

Jack withdrew and lay panting. He smelt of satisfaction. Lola could’ve let him remain on top of her all day. His long, lean torso and legs and all were hers. He cursed quietly and smiled at her.

‘What did Patrick say? He let you stay?’ she whispered when curled in under his arm and next to his smooth chest. ‘I take it that they’re gone back to the mainland?’

‘He thinks I’ve lost my mind,’ Jack said, brushing his fingers through her hair. ‘My father is always right. I have lost all sense.’

‘You’re staying then?’ Lola asked, tickling around a nipple that stood firm.

‘Unless I swim back,’ Jack joked. ‘But I might be lynched if I tried that. The crowds on the shore will notice I’ve not returned with the boat.’

‘What does all of this mean?’ Lola said, moving to gaze up at those worried handsome features.

‘I don’t know. We’ll have to see. They’ll think that the Temptress of the Sands has stolen my mind, heart... and cock.’

‘And have I?’ Lola asked with a knowing smile.

Jack didn’t answer but rolled over to smother her body with his own. Their love-making was to begin again. Lola bit her lip to stop herself from squealing in pleasure when his lips found nipples to suck passionately. His jaw scrapped upwards to find her mouth. But after many glorious minutes of kissing and fondling when he entered her again she tipped over the edge and begged him, ‘Never stop. Never, ever stop.’

Their bodies were so good together. Instinctively their touches

and movements worked. His mouth, those rough fingers, their heat, it was all so good. Lola found that precious wave was coming again as he ground his pelvis repeatedly into hers. 'I'm yours take me now,' she said between pants and as he came she peaked even more intense than before. She let out a long low sigh as they both caught their breaths.

'Is this normal?' Jack asked her puffing. 'My heart might burst open.'

'Don't you know yet, Jack C Fitzgerald? There is nothing normal about Lola de Lacy.'

With a kiss, Jack closed his eyes. Lola watched him fall asleep and wished she could capture such handsome happiness forever. He was a peaceful dreamer. He barely moved a muscle bar reaching out to pull her closer if she moved away in the slightest. He was stuck to her in sweat and she was glued to him. Joyfully nestled in beside his love.

This was more than lust. Lola was going to have to admit that. But she wouldn't say that to him. No. There would be no surrender to these captivating emotions. He was staying and it would possibly be for a long while. The crowds on the shore would think him spoiled goods by now and in ways, he was. Lola had defiled him. That made her giggle.

'What's so funny?' Jack croaked in a sleepy voice. 'Are you happy, Madame de Lacy?'

'They wouldn't harm you, though, would they? The people on the shore?' Lola questioned. 'You are one of their own? They wouldn't hurt you?'

'I'm now a wicked man who stayed on the Sands with the Irish Temptress and I've never been happier.'

'You stayed here before – what makes this any different?'

'Hopefully father has the same idea and tells them nothing,' Jack said, pulling his nose and moving strands of Lola's hair from near her mouth. 'He will have calmed down by the time he reaches the mainland and he'll have thought of a good reason for me remaining here.'

'Patrick saw us kissing?' Lola asked, but the answer was obvious. 'Was he very annoyed?'

'More worried. For us both. And himself and Michael. Things are quite bad in the village. I've stopped going into the public house.'

'They're still shouting for my blood?' Lola asked, slightly

trembling. 'They won't come here will they?'

'No. You're safe on the Isle of Sands.' Jack patted her bare shoulder. 'I only hope Lord Rockford understands why I might have stayed? I'll say that I was surveying things. Getting the Lord of the Sands to make drawings. Yes, that's what I was doing.'

Lola's eyes were as heavy as her heart. 'That could take quite a while,' Lola whispered. 'Patrick didn't take the parcels and correspondence with him and I promised Mortimer we'd see them delivered properly. He's convinced his father will acknowledge him if he receives enough letters and if I ask him to accept his son.'

'He thinks that will work?'

Lola could hear resentment. 'Do you think Patrick will be back tomorrow?' she asked.

'I don't know,' Jack said. 'He left in a big hurry. Things were said. I explained that I was in charge on the lake and the Isle of Sands. He hates that he's given me that freedom and responsibility. He's sorry now that I'm no longer a child that he can box around the ears.'

'If you are in charge does that mean that you're a better smuggler and gunrunner than your father then?' Lola asked.

Jack pulled away and sat up in bed. 'What?'

'You heard me. Who are the weapons for? The Irish rebels? Is there going to be another rebellion in Ireland?' Lola asked sleepily. She was always on the side of the oppressed and usually was exceptionally interested in anything that might overthrow her patrons. 'Do I need to put things back into my trunk? For when I need to flee. I've been caught up in rebellions before.'

'Have you now?'

'Do I need to dig up my treasure? Maybe I need to dig it up myself before you do it, for some ill-fated cause. That has happened to me before as well.' She yawned for she was only teasing him.

'I would never steal from a woman!'

'Good to know.' Lola yawned again. 'We're safe, for now then?'

'Aye.'

Lola stretched her arms in the air. 'You've exhausted me, Jack C Fitzgerald.'

'And I am not finished with you yet!' he said, sliding down the bed to find her nipple with his mouth. 'I'm not finished with you at all.'

## Chapter 22

Never before had Jack slept on in the morning for so long. The scent of Lola lingered and he rolled over, but she was not in their bed. He opened one eye and then another. Polly was bleating outside, so Lola was out there and he was in Mrs Beatty's old cottage. He wasn't dreaming.

Lola was his mistress. He sniffed in satisfaction and rubbed his cock. He was virile and she had enjoyed the night. She had this way of gripping his arm, biting down on her lip and moaning that drove him wild. Even the thought of her near him made him hard. How could she do that? He'd never have enough of Lola – Never.

Lola was Jack's woman and she loved him. She hadn't said it yet. But, he hadn't either. Their bodies revealed it to each other over and over again. It was plain as the cock in his fingers, Lola needed and loved him as much as he needed and adored her. Was she like this with Rockford? All of her men were besotted!

Lola came in with a basket and set it lightly on the table. There was a smell of baking bread as she moved the lid off the pot.

'That smells good enough to eat,' Jack called from the bed.

Lola's despairing look made him laugh. 'I think it's stuck to the pot,' she admitted and knelt on the ground to investigate closer. 'It should be baked by now.'

'I thought you didn't cook?' Jack said, throwing back the covers and looking around for his discarded clothes. 'I slept too long, I never do that.'

'You had me doing many things I don't normally do too,' Lola said, smiling. 'Like that position where you take me from behind? When did you learn that, Jack Fitzgerald?'

That made him smile. 'I don't know what you mean,' he said, trying to hide a proud grin. 'Am I a good lover then?' he tried. 'You seem to enjoy our time together.'

Lola came to his side by the bed. She tickled down his bare back and felt his rear through his then found trousers and said, '*Together, we are perfect.*'

'Did you see my shirt?' Jack asked, looking around. He would

take her into the sheets again if she wasn't careful.

'While you were sleeping I sewed the buttons back on,' Lola said and swished the long tails of her skirt in glee. 'I know. You're doing things to me. I'm not sure what is happening to me. Here.' She unfolded the shirt from a chair and handed it over.

The mangled threads around the buttons made Jack chuckle but without examining the work, he closed all the wonky buttons and kissed the tip of Lola's nose and said, 'Thank you. Take that bread out, though, I can smell it burning.'

The bread was blackened on the bottom and was rock hard. Jack chomped down on it and almost broke his tooth, yet he grinned, leaned over, kissed the tip of Lola's nose again and said, 'Thank you. *Together. We are perfect.*'

'You're a bad liar, Jack C Fitzgerald,' Lola said, smiling. 'A lady cannot be good at everything. That is my excuse.'

'Can I ask you my question for today?'

'You asked me one already,' Lola replied.

'I did not!'

'You asked where your shirt was,' Lola said with a triumphant smirk. 'But, I will allow another.'

Jack pulled the chair closer to the table and steadied himself. 'Do you think you could love me the way that I love you? And be honest, Lola de Lacy. And I want a real, true answer. Do you love or care for me? Will you love me, like I love you.' Jack gulped down the hard, burnt bread and waited. 'Please answer me?'

Lola picked at the crumbs on the table. She breathed in and out and blinked. Jack held his chest. 'Do I have to tell you this now?' she whispered.

Jack thumped the table and made her jump. 'YES.'

When Lola looked at him, Jack melted. She was crying. A swipe of her hand removed the evidence. 'I've never had a man ask me this before – ever. It's hit me like a blow, no man cared enough to ask me my feelings before. Not even my husband. It was expected that I cared and it didn't matter how I felt.'

'I care. So, answer me. Please?' Jack said with tears blurring his sight of Lola. 'A simple yes or no, Lola.'

'My real name is not Lola de Lacy,' he heard her say. She wasn't going to answer him. His head and heart hurt, but then she said, 'Lizzie Chambers and Lola de Lacy love all of you, wonderful Jack C Fitzgerald. We love all of you.'

The chair was flung from under him and Lola was in his arms smothered in his kisses. She was clothed and so was he, but there against the table he unleashed his cock and prodded between her thighs until he found his home. She held his back and each thrust made her mutter something he couldn't make out. Lola had such a hold on him everywhere and in every way. 'There? You need me? Love me?' he said with each curl of his pelvis and each stride inside his Lola. She was very wet. 'Together. We are perfect,' he said, holding her face. 'Look at me while I'm deep inside you.' Her mouth opened and Jack filled her as she never looked so wanton or passionate before. Kissing Lola, he surged on up into that place of bliss. He thoroughly lost himself and his seed.

'I don't want any others to have you,' Jack whispered while she was still in his embrace. He kissed the soft flesh of her neck. 'It would hurt me to know you wanted someone else this way. Do you hear me?'

Lola nodded against his shoulder and chest.

'I don't have a lot to offer you...'

'Shh,' Lola said, holding his lips together. 'You love me. That's enough.'

There was a bark from a dog outside and scraping at the door. Then a knock. Jack fumbled to dress himself and Lola fixed her hair and the front of her skirt. She went to answer the door and in bound the red setter belonging to Lord Rockford. But it was Patrick's boots she recognised. 'Welcome,' she said in Irish and he smiled.

'We are back. I nearly know every wave on the water! Over and back like a lunatic,' Patrick said to Jack. 'It's damn near noon and it looks like you're just awake? But at least you've managed to keep her clothes on.'

Lola started cutting the bread and Patrick curled his nose up at the sight.

'You might teach her how to make bread?' Jack asked, to appease the tension. 'She sewed on my buttons, but the bread needs practice.'

The dog leapt up on Jack's leg to get petted.

'She won't leave us,' Patrick said, nodding to the red setter. 'We've named her Rua.'

'Rua, meaning red-haired?' Lola said. 'Tea?' she asked the men as she knelt to welcome the dog too.

‘I’ll make the tea,’ Patrick said in English. ‘You two will starve out here. Or are ya living on love?’

Jack ignored the reference to his emotional turmoil and asked, ‘What did you tell them on the shore?’

‘Said you have work out here and that the lord will be building on the Sands. The place went mad saying whatever was built would sink!’ Patrick found the flour, milk and salt. He threw them expertly into a bowl and suddenly he was kneading dough, giving Jack all the news. Lola watched his hands while he worked and Jack watched them both.

How he loved Lola. He admired his father. He was a good man and an excellent guiding hand in his life. Was him baking bread with Lola similar to blessing their union? ‘Are you still angry?’ he asked Patrick.

‘With you?’ Patrick asked, thumping the dough about. ‘I am worried about my boy.’

‘Worried?’ Lola asked. ‘About Jack?’

‘Yes,’ Patrick said and floured the wooden surface and rolled some more. ‘Leave this somewhere to prove. Leave it for an hour or more. I’ll see to the pot’s temperature now and it should take the bread and bake it without any full direct heat.’

Jack did as instructed and then asked, ‘Can you tell her that you approve of us?’

Patrick was on his hunkers by the fire. ‘You want to know for yourself.’

‘I do.’

‘There is nothing but heartache in this,’ Patrick said, ‘mark my words. But I’ve never stood in your way when your heart is set on something and I won’t start now.’

Jack grunted as thanks and winked at Lola. ‘All will be well,’ Jack said to them both. ‘All will be well.’

‘I think I can find a way around Lord Rockford. With my connections I know of a possible new bride for him and I’ll convince him to care for Mortimer,’ Lola said.

‘Will he not need to mourn for a time?’ Jack asked and then shrugged at the look he got from Lola. ‘They don’t grieve for long then?’

‘No.’

Patrick merely murmured in Irish at Jack, ‘And what about our business? Seanín says there will be a case coming from Spain any



day now. What then? Are you going to be able to take them all ashore and across the island without people seeing or talking? What if the lord himself is here when they arrive? What then? Our heads will be on a pretty platter for either the Spaniards, the British, the Irish Brotherhood, or the mob on the shore. They all will be mad with us at the one time!

As always Patrick was right. The transporting and storage of weapons for the Irish cause was a quiet but dangerous enterprise. It earned them the most money and with all of this chaos the whole operation was in jeopardy. Never mind the rebellion itself.

‘We can trust Lola. I’m certain of that,’ Jack said. Lola was listening and heard her name. She raised her eyebrow to question what was said. ‘The Lord of the Sands also admitted to knowing some things but he’s sworn he will remain silent. I believe him. It’s Ivan we need to worry about.’

‘She’s not one of your own, lad.’ Patrick pointed with a knife he was peeling potatoes with. ‘She knows all of the gentry and doesn’t know the pain of living under tyranny.’

‘If anyone understands tyranny – it’s Lola,’ Jack said. ‘She’s been abused by them all, for most of her life.’

‘Has she now?’ Patrick said. ‘And she doesn’t know how to make bread, peel spuds or sew on buttons. She’s had it tough.’

‘She’s Irish and from Sligo,’ Jack said, jumping to Lola’s defence.

‘Protestant?’ Patrick asked. ‘Mrs Beatty only worked for Protestant houses, for it was only them who could afford maids and the likes.’

Jack hadn’t gotten to that question with Lola yet but she didn’t bless herself and she didn’t have any icons. His father was possibly correct again. Religion mattered to Jack and his people. Catholic Ireland mattered.

‘Father is asking questions,’ Jack said. He had found a loophole in her stipulation of only one question a day. ‘He’s concerned. But, I don’t have the answers for him.’

‘What does he want to know?’ Lola asked.

‘I’ve told him that you are Irish. But he’s afraid you are a Protestant.’

Lola laughed. ‘Is that all that is worrying him about me?’

Jack grinned. ‘It’s one of the worst things. Yes. He’s also thinking you will tell of our enterprise to your powerful friends.’

‘You’ve told me nothing about that and who would I tell? And

why would I?’

‘That’s not putting his mind at ease.’

‘I know nothing and I still will promise to be quiet,’ Lola said. ‘Does that help?’

‘He’s also wondering about your life as a courtesan. And what that was like?’ Jack asked, rubbing his jaw. ‘Were there many men in your past?’

‘Patrick isn’t interested in the ins and outs of my work.’ Lola smiled. Jack had been found out.

‘Mrs Beatty? How did you know her?’ Jack asked quickly.

‘How much do you need to know?’

‘It all. Father wants to know everything.’ Jack winked.

‘She was my wet-nurse when I was a baby. Her own baby died and I believe she was unmarried. She worked for my family in Sligo telling everyone her husband had also died of the fever. When my mother was murdered she came with my father and I to France. From there, she met a great many people and we lived well, but my father was a drunkard and we returned home to Ireland alone and destitute. Mrs Beatty convinced my family to take me in until I was about thirteen. Then she was sent away. I think she was asked by Lord Rockford to keep an eye out for Mortimer here on the Sands. I have no proof of that – yet. But she and I stayed in touch. When I got the opportunity to come to Donegal, and to visit near the Sands for paid employment, I took it. I wanted to see my Mrs B.’

Jack sat open-mouthed. She’d confided in him and he was stunned.

‘And if your father wants to know, I’ve not lain with Lord Rockford. I was brought here mainly to educate his wife in the sensualities women could experience if they knew how. I’ve helped other aristocracy in similar ways. It has been a long time since I danced or removed my own clothes for money, but I have done those things. I’ve been mistress to an heir to a European throne, the head of an army, a few ambassadors, shady lords and angry dukes. I eloped to be a loving wife to a composer who beat me and I have never been in love before. There. Is that enough...? For your father?’

# Chapter 23

Lola summarised it quite easily for Jack and made it sound palatable. At least it sounded better in shortened form. It lacked emotion but also the salacious details Mortimer enjoyed. Lola found being open about her past was not as hard as she once thought.

‘And you’re a Catholic?’ Jack asked with a grimace.

‘Does you need me to be one, Patrick?’ she asked. ‘I never go to any church. I pray to the angels – occasionally.’

Jack went to his coat pocket and removed the whittled and carved angel. ‘For you,’ he said, placing it gently into Lola’s hands. It was beautiful. The roughness of the knife marks giving the face expression and the wings feathers.

‘How clever! Did you make this?’ Lola asked. ‘Thank you.’

Patrick came to see what they had between them. Seeing the carving he sniffed and wiped the back of his hand under her nose. ‘You’ll need a blessing from your father now,’ he said and held Jack’s hand on top of Lola’s and spoke in Irish.

‘I think he’s content now,’ Jack said and his father nodded.

‘Of course,’ Lola said and rubbed Jack’s arm. ‘I don’t lie, Jack. I am many things but I’m not a liar. I’ve never loved anyone before.’

Jack blushed for his father would hear such words.

‘But, I think you’re all out of questions for today, Mr Fitzgerald,’ she said.

Jack kissed her cheek quickly and glanced at his father. He was busy by the fire and so Jack let his mouth fall on Lola’s again. She sucked in her breath and held it. Her belly fluttered and her legs wobbled. What this man did to her with just one kiss! She kept her eyes closed and waited for more. Nothing came. But then his father was in the room and there was a nice aroma coming from the pot.

While they were eating potatoes with parsley sauce Patrick started a tale about Ivan, the schoolmaster. He threatened to expose their operations on the Sands.

‘Why now?’ Lola asked.

Jack’s mouth was full but his face told her that there were grave concerns. He almost looked pale.

Lola stopped eating, waiting on the reply with worry. 'What is his motivation?'

'You,' Patrick said with his mouthful. 'He wants you.'

Jack put down his fork.

'Is that what this is?' Lola asked Jack. 'He wants me or he'll tell the authorities?'

'He says he'll leave the island and in the process tell the people on shore all about you and Mortimer's naked cavorting. All about you and I and also about the guns.' Jack looked crestfallen. 'I'll kill him!' he blurted out.

'But, surely there are other women for the likes of Ivan? Why now does he suddenly want me?'

'Where are the other women?' Jack asked. 'And he knows how I feel about you. It's a stab at our hearts that he's after. Hurting the Fitzgeralds was always something he wanted. He knows Mortimer is fond of you as well. He kills two birds with the one stone.'

'Do the people you supply take kindly to threats?' Lola asked. 'Can they be told about this?'

'No,' Jack said. 'They will tell me this is my fault and to deal with him. I say we take a chance at slitting his throat and burying him somewhere?'

Lola laughed. Patrick chuckled too.

'It's the only way,' Jack said. 'What else can we do with him?'

'Leave Ivan to me,' Lola said confidently. 'I've met more than one Ivan before now. We will string him along. Do nothing rash or hasty.'

'She's a clever woman,' Patrick said. 'But Ivan is also a learned man. He won't be easily fooled. He's lived without carnal knowledge of a woman until now. He hasn't been to the mainland for twenty years. And my question now is why has he not been?' Patrick asked.

'That's a good observation. He's hiding himself. We need to figure out what from and use it against him. In the meantime, leave Ivan to me.'

Jack's eyebrows hunched together in uncertainty. He was a fine-looking man even then.

'They've brought blocks and mortar and lime for the work to start,' Jack told Lola after Patrick finished eating and left with a parcel of grub for Michael who was waiting to beach the boat. 'I'm to help them take it ashore. We've to call with Seanín and I'm to

leave with them this evening. I think it best that I come and go. It shows the crowd on the shore that I'm not afraid of them and also have nothing to hide.'

'I suppose,' Lola said, eating slowly and savouring each mouthful. 'Patrick is a good cook,' she added, refusing to engage with talk of Jack's absence. 'I've never worried about being alone before. And I've never wanted a man to stay.'

Jack reached over the table and kissed her on the mouth. He tasted nice. She kissed him back. Even kissing him was something special. Lola was totally smitten.

'I should go,' Jack said, getting off the chair. 'I'll be back soon. Keep the pistol near you. Are you sure you can hit a moving target?'

'Yes. I can.' Lola sighed. 'Why do men never believe a woman can shoot?'

'Can you shoot a breathing man though?' Jack asked, pulling on his jacket. 'Killing or maiming a person is different from hitting a sitting target.'

'I have shot a man,' Lola said, not disguising the pride in her voice. 'It did cause me a bit of a problem and some time in prison. But, that is a story for another time. Trust me. When I aim between a man's eyes, I don't miss. If my goal is to hit him lower down then I always hit my mark too.'

Jack stood still, staring at her. He was seeing her anew. It was fun to shock him.

'Don't worry, I had a good reason for it,' Lola said, coming across the floor to meet him. Jack folded her into his arms and his tongue found its way in to meet hers and the wobble came to her legs and the urgency to be even closer to him began. 'Go,' she whispered when they stopped to breathe. 'Go now before I make you stay.'

'We've not talked about how to deal with Rockford or Ivan?' Jack said from the door.

'Go,' Lola said with a reassuring smile. But when Jack closed the door behind him she put her head in her hands. What was she going to do about all of these problems. They were insurmountable. But then again, Lola had gotten herself out of worse trouble. There would be a way, and she would find it. Hopefully, there would be a satisfactory conclusion to most of the dilemmas before Jack and herself were ruined. Lola looked to their angel on the mantelpiece and said a prayer.

Mrs Beatty always was a matchmaker but who knew the recipe of a good match? Lola used to know until she met and swooned over Jack Fitzgerald. Now she was a complete mess.

# Chapter 24

There was no chance for Jack to miss his Lola. The plans and lugging of building materials was one thing, the employing of labourers was another and then there was the organisation of shifts of sailors to go to and from the Sands.

The church, the mob on the shore and the wives that were on the mainland, were displeased about the planned work. The shilling might also be the Crown's but there was need of it to survive. Everyone lay close to starvation. They were literally in need of work to live. There was no place for morals or beliefs when you were starving. Men were reluctant at first, and then when Jack returned, there was a curiosity about the Sands and the Temptress. Talk in the village changed slightly. It moved from disgust to intrigue and gossip rather than vicious threats. But still, any subtle questioning on Jack's behalf about Ivan the schoolmaster started a handlin' he couldn't get stopped.

'Another bastard that has evil in him. That island is cursed to the depths of hell and back. And him out there for twenty years and battering that poor child useless. And the fever taking Mrs B. Glorious woman that she was. And no need for her to die for she wasn't an old woman. Letting people come ashore from there is only asking for trouble and having men working out there is not good. But what can the poor critters do, they need the money? The holy water is the only protection we have.'

The zeal from the men ashore was hard to the last. Each statement spat out or moaned out over and over. It was tiring.

When they got home Michael was the one to shed some light on the past of Ivan. 'The word is he was a traitor. His people all worked for those in the Big House, but he was bright and gained a scholarship for a few years in a school in Sligo. There, he got recruited as a spy for the British. An agent for the Crown.'

Jack scoffed.

'Well, that's what I was told. His people were all caught up with the Sassenachs. His sister fell with child to Lord Rockford and shortly after that Ivan was caught trying to play both sides. The

rebels thought he was one of their own and the British paid him to spy. He did neither very well and upset everyone. He ran. A coward to the last. It was only due to his sister's pleas that he was let out of prison on the lord's say so. But, if ever he was seen on Irish soil again, he was to be arrested and put back in prison.'

'We all knew that the lord gave him employment on the Sands because of his sister and the child. But he's a dirty dog who should keep his head down. Instead, he's provoking me.'

Patrick asked, 'But why now? Why is he suddenly thinking he can be this bold?'

'Might he want off the island and think he'll be in favour with the English if he tells what he knows?'

'Perhaps,' Jack agreed.

Patrick puffed for a while. 'And even if Lola went to his bed, he could still drop all of us in hot water. There is no guarantee that he'll not let us down at the worst possible time.'

Jack drew his finger across his neck. 'This is the only way to know he's silent for sure. Mortimer would help us.'

Patrick did a double-take at Jack. 'What? He'd never help us!'

'I asked for his assistance with Lola. She's very fond of him.' Jack ignored the others' disapproving coughs and continued. 'I asked for him to help us get rid of Lord Rockford as well.'

'I'd forgotten about him,' Michael said. 'Lola is a popular woman.'

Jack grimaced.

Patrick was pacing in their kitchen, like Jack would normally. But Jack was petting Rua and she was resting against his calf.

'Might Lola be a spy?' Michael asked suddenly. 'Now don't go down my throat, Jack. Perhaps she's been sent to the Sands for a reason? Perhaps she's there to keep an eye on what's going on.'

'Never,' Jack said quietly and held Rua's ear while he said a silent prayer that she was not anything like that at all. 'She's a woman for god's sake.'

Michael shook his head. 'I've read about women doing such work for kings and nobles. She would be just the type of woman they'd send. Wasn't it Rockford himself who suggested us to her? And, perhaps Ivan had already alerted them to our movements but they didn't quite trust him. They needed one of their own to tell them the truth of things?'

'Why not ask Mortimer then?' Jack said. 'Lola is not one of



*them.'*

'He would want off the island in return. He wouldn't be safe out there if he ratted. That wouldn't be an option for them. She would be the perfect informant.'

'If Lord Rockford knows about the guns he'd never build us a wharf. He'd not make it easier for us to get the guns ashore. He's set out large funds to do it, and more to fix up Beatty's cottage. If he didn't think Lola was staying, then he wouldn't waste his money.'

'True,' Patrick said, mid-puff. 'And he is going ahead with things. I don't think Lola is interested in Irish freedom in any way. What do you think, Jack?'

'Like the rest of us, Lola is interested in surviving and very little else. She is ambitious and clever. The only thing that worried her was that I'd steal from her to invest in weapons. It happened to her before. I'm starting to wonder when that was and how it happened?'

'Does she have many funds to take?' Patrick asked. 'What was in that trunk?'

'Someone else on the Sands was eager to know that while she was there alone,' Jack said. 'She noticed her trunk was moved.'

'Ivan,' Patrick said. 'He's a greedy dog. He'd steal from a woman alone.'

Michael agreed. 'Seanín also wanted to know what was in it. Said he'd seen us take it ashore. Wondered if there was loot in it we could use for the cause. Patrick and I told him no, that it was only dresses, but I think he was still curious.'

'I'll tell Mortimer to look out for her safety when we're not there,' Jack said. 'He has no need of her trinkets and he'll be a good ally. We've shook on it.'

Patrick stared. 'Where is my hot-headed son? What have you done with him? Before now, he'd have beaten all to a pulp and be on some prison ship by now. This woman? Her influence is not all bad.'

'I'd like to stay with her an odd time in Beatty's cottage. To make sure she's all right,' Jack tried. 'And before you give out, it's not an ask. I am saying how it will be. I'm a grown man and she cannot be out there and in danger and me sitting here talking things over and over.'

Michael nodded and looked from Jack to Patrick and back again.

'She only allows me one question about her per day and yes, I

know I am a fool to let a woman control what I ask, but I have agreed to it now and that's that.'

'Well, how long do you know her now? How many days? Work it out and then ask her as many questions,' Michael said with a proud hold of his head. 'She's not much of a talker compared to the few other women I know. It does feel like she's hiding something.'

'She's unique,' Jack said. 'Not that I know many. But I think she's scared. No matter how brave she pretends to be. She knows about this mad mob on the mainland and without even seeing them she knows it's bad. We all care about her and still are wondering if she's a British spy. Is it any wonder she's a quiet sort who worries about men's questions? We are twisting her situation into all sorts of shapes here.' Jack hesitated. 'She has been honest. I know that much. Even when it spoiled her reputation. She's not a liar.'

'There is something, though, son?' Patrick asked. 'You've a niggle in you. I have too. There is something she is concealing. And it must be bad because she has confessed quite a lot of terrible things. Doesn't that bother you?'

Jack scrubbed his nails across his stubble. 'Of course it bothers me. But I'm worried more about her future. Lord Rockford and Ivan both want a piece of her and that bothers me more. I cannot allow it to happen. At least if I am on the island, it wouldn't be as easy for them.'

'One bullet and you'll be gone though,' Michael said. 'A lord or a schoolmaster's word will be taken over yours and hers. They might rape and murder her too.'

'You always had a great imagination,' Patrick said as the candlelight flickered across his jaw. 'But he's right, Jack, you need to tread carefully. Don't give either of them an excuse to cause either of you harm. Also, the lord can stop his building work easily if there's no Lola to go out to. Remember that.'

'That is something I can't forget!' Jack replied. 'We'll even have to give his fucking dog back to him. Even if she doesn't want to leave. My heart is sore thinking about that too.'

'Have you gone soft?' Michael mocked and got a wet cloth thrown at him. 'Rua will find a way to be ours. Just like Lola will.'

'Ours?' Jack said with a curl at the end of his lips. 'Ours?'

'Aye,' Michael said. 'There's not many women about here and I suggest we all share her.' Jack rose from his seat and Michael hastily added, 'I'm joking, Jack. Don't come to slit my throat now.'

We know you won't share her.'

Jack sat back down with a flop. He slapped the table and said, 'Lola de Lacy is mine and no one else's and that's that!'

# Chapter 25

Lying half naked on a man's couch as he painted, Lola smiled to herself. Mortimer hummed, like she did when she didn't want to talk about anything important. Many minutes passed and the birdsong was uplifting.

'Did Jack forbid you from posing for me?' Mortimer asked out of the blue.

'No. He'd not dare,' Lola replied.

'I think I may have agreed that I would not try to seduce you,' Mortimer said from behind the canvas. 'I'd have agreed to any demand. I wanted him to be my friend. Isn't that sad?'

'What do you see as sad?' Lola asked, sitting up a little to peer around the easel. 'That you longed for a friend or that you cannot seduce me?'

Mortimer's handsome face peeked quickly out from behind the board and said, 'Both!'

Lola laughed and resumed her position.

'But I was clever and did say that I hoped you might try to seduce me?' Mortimer chanced.

'Don't you start that nonsense too!' Lola said. 'I've enough men trouble.'

'Have you not made it up with Fitzgerald?' Mortimer asked, peeking back out from the safety of the easel hiding place.

'Jack is not one of my problems,' Lola said. 'He is wonderful.'

'He thinks you are too.'

Lola leapt up and covered herself with the cloth draping over her womanhood and knees. 'Why what did he say?' she asked, looking to catch Mortimer's eye.

'He enlisted my help to "manage" you. I think that was the phrase. And before you shoot the messenger, I warned him that you were not a manageable woman or a woman who would be managed.'

'Quiet right,' Lola replied.

'Fitzgerald wouldn't allow his kin to bother you. That leaves Mr Childs the lonely light-keeper or Ivan? I know Lord Rockford is

sniffing around and building bridges or what have you. Is it Ivan who is bothersome?’

‘He has made a proposition. He wants me or he’ll not remain silent about Jack’s arms shipments. It seems Ivan thinks I’m a fair swap. This tells me that Jack must be quite successful at gun running?’

‘He is,’ Mortimer said, but Lola still could not see his face. It was blocked again by his easel. ‘Jack C Fitzgerald is accomplished at everything he does. Very annoying. I promised him my silence for his friendship. I’m a total ass. Why did I not think like Ivan?’

‘Because you’re a good man and Ivan isn’t,’ Lola said. ‘And because you would want a woman to willingly want you and not because she felt trapped.’

‘True.’

‘Don’t ever change the goodness in you, Mortimer. A woman will find you and love you for the man that you are.’

‘I’m not fit to find her though,’ his bodiless voice said. ‘Should I not be pursuing the woman of my dreams?’

Lola glanced around. He was right, there was little chance of that happening on the Sands.

‘I’ll not find her here. Is that what you think?’ he asked.

Lola sighed and reached for his tattered robe. It smelled of soap and the hair lacquer he used. She breathed it in. If only she had it in her to seduce the young fellow. It was what he needed now, but not what she should do at all.

‘We will get you off the Sands and there will be many fine young ladies looking for you,’ Lola said, walking to find her friend.

‘What if I know the woman I want? And if I don’t think of you as a sister at all? What if that woman is you?’ Mortimer said with his back to Lola. She walked around his naked body.

‘Dear boy, I am your only choice. Once we get you back in society, the world will be at your feet. You’ll have your choice of fine young women. We’ll convince your father that he needs his male heir. What do you say? Cover the painting. I don’t want to see it.’ Lola closed her eyes and fingered the pearls that lay on her chest. She had not buried them and found them to add to the painting. ‘We’ll send him this creation of yours and leave the rest of your love life to me. You will have much better women than me to pick from. I promise you that.’

‘You’re wonderful, Lola,’ Mortimer said. ‘You want nothing in

return?’

‘Did you not say that you’d be my brother?’ Lola asked. ‘I’ve always wanted one. And just because I won’t seduce you, doesn’t mean we won’t have you ready and willing to please a woman when the time comes.’

Lola saw Mortimer’s obvious excitement at the mention of such pleasures. She winked and he spun away from her gaze and found his britches and shirt. ‘From your letters, I learned a great deal,’ Mortimer said. ‘I hope that when I leave here you will still write to me.’

‘I think my life will change in the months to come. There may be less intrigue and salacious chatter. I might become a boring, ordinary woman, living with a lowly fisherman.’

‘Pah!’

‘Ivan is worrying me though. He’s in possession of power and it will go to his head. I know from the only time I’ve seen his eyes that he’s a dangerous man.’

‘He’s a coward behind it all. Jack asked me to help him keep Lord Rockford away from you. If he knows Ivan is also a bother, he’s going to come back in a murderous rage.’

‘Then we’ll have to stop him. As much as I want to practise my shot, I think we need as little attention on the Sands as possible in the next few weeks. There’s enough bother with this Temptress!’

‘They say she cannot leave. Both she and I are trapped,’ Mortimer said, sniggering and filling them both brandies. ‘How grand would it be if everyone would just leave us alone. Imagine if I had found you first. Imagine if you hadn’t fallen into Fitzgerald’s clutches and had come here to meet Mrs B and me. Things would be different now.’

Lola had to agree.

‘Although even Jack Fitzgerald can offer you more than I can at the present time,’ he said. ‘He’s a free man.’

‘For now,’ Lola said thinking aloud. ‘If we can keep him safe.’

‘Lord Rockford will need to be kept very busy if he is here by the time a large Spanish galleon anchors off the far shore. Even a bad-sighted lunatic like him will see a tall ship and investigate her purpose.’

Lola drank the brandy down deep.

‘You are hatching a plan,’ he said. ‘Tell me what you are plotting. You have that gleam in your eye.’

Lola took stock of the young man before her and asked, 'Have you any loyalty to Ivan Tallon? Would you allow him to be hurt?'

'Hurt?' Mortimer asked. 'How?'

'Would you allow him to fall into a trap that might harm him?' Lola asked.

Mortimer came to sit on his hunkers by her chair; he held her hand and looked intently at Lola. 'I want him to roast in the fiery pit of hell. I'd have murdered him years ago but for my promise to Mrs Beatty that I wouldn't cause myself to be even more imprisoned than I am already. I hate the man. Loathe him and want him gone.'

'But if that was really to happen – would you warn him?'

Mortimer touched Lola's wrist and rolled up the robe. 'You see this mark. This brand that some man gave you.' Mortimer dropped his trousers in one fell swoop and lifted his leg to reveal his inner thigh, near his groin. 'Ivan did this to me.' There were five deep scars making two capital letters. One was an I and the other a T.

Lola held her mouth and gasped. The marks were very pronounced and old scars.

'He did this,' Mortimer said. 'It wasn't until Mrs Beatty came here that I confided in someone that I realised how bad he was. She ensured that side of him stopped, but then he became even more vicious. I'm going to say something even worse. I wonder sometimes if he poisoned Mrs B and blamed a sickness? He threatened to poison me several times.' Mortimer sniffed and brushed away a tear. 'He knows about biology and chemistry. I'm not sure how he would get to poison her, though, for she was never near him. She stood up to him. But he was very pleased with himself when she died. I almost killed him with my bare hands for the smugness he harboured.'

'She never mentioned him in her letters,' Lola breathed heavily.

'She was afraid he would get his hands on them?'

'Yes, of course. Dear God in heaven,' Lola said, looking at the sky and the birds in flight. 'The poteen? Would she have drank his liquor?'

Mortimer cursed loudly. Lola held his shoulders and they shed a few tears together. For whether Ivan Tallon murdered their friend or not, she was gone and they missed her.

As Lola wiped Mortimer's face she said, 'I've got an idea of how to make him suffer. Leave it to me.'

Mortimer sank into her arms and sobbed a little more.

‘I’ll make him pay for hurting those I love,’ she promised.



## Chapter 26

Everything was keeping Jack from the Isle of Sands. Whether it was work on their own house, the potato crop and animals they kept in the field out the back, to the labouring he kept up in case something happened to the *Fair Lass*. The walls around Rockford were still being built with famine works' money and it was a skill in itself. Jack did enjoy the methodical, mind-numbing stone-building. There was a trial of where a stone might sit and a jiggling it into position and then the filling in around it with smaller rocks.

Most hours had thoughts of Lola in them. Did she think about him? What might she be doing? Who might she be with? How would he cope if and when Lola could leave the Sands? He had bother keeping men off her when there were only a handful to bother them. What would become of their partnership if she had more choice and temptation? She'd not promised him anything and he'd not committed to her by proposing marriage.

In more ways than one, Lola was the only woman Jack needed. Even if he had others to choose from, he would still pick Lola, but would she choose him above all others? Considering her life to date, it was unlikely and this fear hit him often.

He was just heading for McGuire's after a gruelling day in the Donegal rain when Lord Rockford came striding towards him. 'Tomorrow. I'm going to inspect where and how you intend on constructing this pier tomorrow,' he said.

Jack kept his head low. 'There's not good feeling about that pier. Keep your voice down.'

'I don't care if the rabble are happy or not!' Rockford said loudly. 'We go tomorrow.'

Jack had slowed progress on the project for fear of it bringing trouble between himself and Lola. He wanted a few more days alone with her before things were pressurised with the presence of other men. It was foolhardy to suppose that he could shield them both for long, but in his naivety he'd never imagined Lord Rockford approaching him in the street about it.

'I suppose I can leave my work on the wall and see to getting

you out there. It all depends on the weather, mind you.'

'This work needs started and the sooner the better. I thought you wanted this done? Is there a need for you to be building walls? Are you not part of my patronage of the Sands?'

'I worry that I will lose my place if you get bored with this new idea. Your Lordship has started things before now and let them go.'

'Like what?' Rockford shouted.

'Like the forest you wanted felled until you heard the cost. Like the canal you wanted dug,' Jack said, leaning on the wall of McGuire's in a lethargic fashion. 'I don't want to lose steady work on a whim of yours.'

'Whim?' The turn of his face was comical as a raindrop plopped off his large nose. 'This is no whim! I aim to make the island easier to access for the inhabitants.'

'For the three inhabitants.'

'You thought this an excellent prospect just last week,' Rockford said.

'I still do, but it is you who must see this as an excellent investment.' Jack sighed and pushed his cap back on his forehead. 'And it needs to be a completed job, not some half-arsed idea. That's all I'm saying.'

'I'm not sure what you are saying, Fitzgerald. I intend on going to see this tomorrow and getting it started and finished as we discussed.'

'Right. See you first thing.'

'Indeed you shall.' Rockford swung his tailed coat and marched off in his buckled shoes. Why was it that men thought dressing like women made them look good? Jack pushed the door open into the smokiness of the public house. His plan to delay the lord from Lola was in vain and he needed a whiskey. He had many. Each one was more needed than the last.

It was Patrick's body that swayed when Jack stood by the long mahogany counter. For Jack was drunk, but wouldn't admit to it. Patrick toppled to the right as Jack steadied himself. 'I'm fine,' he lied to his father who was tilting again in Jack's sight line, 'although you keep moving.'

'Jack, you're the one who's drunk and falling over when you try to walk. What would your mother say about this?' Patrick asked, holding Jack's elbow tightly and then he whispered, 'or what would Lola say?'

‘Somehow I think she’d agree that getting drunk was a good plan. Life needs stupidity sometimes. Rockford wants taken to the Sands tomorrow.’

‘Ah,’ Patrick said, linking his arm around his intoxicated son. ‘This is about Lola after all.’

‘He’ll want her. Then what?’ Jack asked, leaning heavily on his father’s side as he attempted to move them both through the men gathered to quench their thirst and the day’s hardships. ‘He’ll want her and I’ll have to take him out there. What kind of man am I?’

‘One who needs to sober up and keep his voice down.’ Patrick’s teeth clenched together as he spoke. ‘And a man who needs to get a grip on what he wants out of this life. Is it money or love you need most? Which is it?’

Jack shook his dark hair and rubbed a hand over the bridge of his nose and eyes. What did he want? If only it was as simple as choosing one thing over another. There was always someone more powerful who took choices out of your hands.

As he swayed and relieved himself in an alley on the way home, Jack could imagine a lord easily falling out of a boat on choppy waters. It would be no one’s fault if he failed to resurface. But then the island and Lola would definitely be seen as cursed. And until Jack was paid for the materials and building supply storage they’d already begun, he’d need to get all thoughts like that stopped.

The letter sat looking at Jack and Patrick from the kitchen table. The seal discouraged them from prising the paper open. Michael was also not about, so there was no one to read it. Jack knew basic words but the swirling handwriting would get the better of him.



\* \* \*

The bashing and barking of them getting ready for the morning trip hurt Jack’s head. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth in the

horrors of a hangover and his stomach ached from alcohol consumption. Patrick clapped his back and Jack groaned in pain. When they arrived and peered over the edge of the pier the lough's waves lapped the stone steps next to the *Fair Lass*. Lord Rockford was already there.

'Morning,' Jack called. 'You're early. No crowds of lunatics up at this ungodly hour either.' There were two or three Jack recognised from the shore vigil against the Temptress, but the majority were still sleeping. How he wished he still was doing the same.

'I aim to be there and back quickly. I've important meetings after midday,' Lord Rockford said.

Jack brightened. 'You won't stay long out there so? Oh and we brought you back your dog.'

'Keep the bitch,' Lord Rockford shouted back. 'She's more bother than she's worth. You're welcome to her.' Jack didn't need to be told that twice and he asked one of the children to lead Rua back to their own house and promised them all a treat on his return. Rua didn't want to go but the boy was persuasive. One of Jack's fears of losing the dog was quenched – he had but one more to go. His Lola.

The morning had a fair, fresh breeze and that settled the boat into a good speed through the water. There was joy in the simple things on a morning of this kind; the squawk of a seagull, the smell of brine in the air, the flap of a sail, the creak of ropes and the shudder of the tiller. And as they neared the far shore, the figure of Lola, waiting.

She waved and all of them returned the gesture. There in the cape she wore on the day Jack first laid eyes on her, Lola waved again. Lord Rockford grinned and took off his hat to add to the greeting. His arm gestured madly, like Jack might have done if there wasn't his patron in the boat with them. Rockford practically fell from the side of the boat into her arms. The corner of her eye caught Jack's gaze and she winked while linking the lord's arm away from them all.

'A moment before you start your work,' Lola said to the lord. Jack was distracted and let the boat thump the rocks. Luckily, she was unharmed. His pride was hurt though no one other than the crew noticed but he apologised to his other Fair Lass as he, too, jumped ashore. There was no Lola to link his arm and it was hard to watch her take another man up the sandy path.

What she was saying to the lord was anyone's guess. Was he

only allowed one question a day too? Jack never took his eyes off the pair of them. Lola's cape billowed out behind her. She reached high to talk directly into the bald-headed man's ear. He nodded and held fingers to his mouth in thought. She smiled. There was more discussion and then it seemed a decision was made for back they both came to Jack.

'Good day to you, Mr Jack C Fitzgerald.' Lola greeted him as though he were a stranger. 'I'll leave you men to your work now.'

Jack and the rest of them watched her leave and then Rockford started ordering Jack around. He listened to his list of demands and ideas. How a man who never got his hands dirty could decide on how to build anything never mind a structure that would be battered by wind, waves and men for decades if not centuries was beyond Jack. He agreed to everything with an 'aye' or 'correct' or 'yes'. However, this work would be done by the men who built the village pier and Jack would sublet the work to them. The lord would not speak Irish and the men spoke very little English, so the Fitzgeralds were in charge – and that was that.

When Rockford glanced at his pocket watch and ordered to be taken back to the village, Jack stood on the rocks and beckoned his crew to come ashore. 'You'll stay and see to Lola's needs at the cottage,' Rockford said to Jack when the *Fair Lass* was almost alongside. 'She mentioned she needed some work done.'

'Very good, me Lord,' Jack said, trying to hide his delight. He was the very man to see to Lola's needs. Jack grinned broadly at his crew and informed them in their own tongue that he was staying on the Sands and would see them in a couple of days. 'He wants me to see to Lola's needs,' he said and winked. 'And I'll keep an eye out for the other business we are waiting on. They must be due any day now.'

'Get this work started,' Lord Rockford said with his irritating air of authority.

'Seeing to everything will take time,' Jack said. 'But you can trust me to do what is necessary.'

Jack heaved the *Fair Lass* off and stood until she was well out in the lough before he turned for Beatty Cottage. Whatever Lola had said worked. They were alone again and Lola had managed to make it happen. She was a truly remarkable woman.

# Chapter 27

Pretty, early, wild thornless roses that Jack picked for her sat on the table. At least Lola thought they were wild roses. She was not well versed in flora unless it was Mrs Beatty's medicinal knowledge. If Lola was to remain in Ireland, this would change. Especially on an island, she could be an expert on all its life forms, if she put her mind to it.

But, leaving places was what Lola did. From when she was a small girl, travelling 'far away' was on the tip of her tongue and mind. There was nomadic blood ambling through her veins. It was always prodding Lola to visualise greener grass elsewhere. However, she couldn't leave. This might be helping her more than she'd care to admit. Since she arrived on the island, Lola had not considered where she might go next. The Sands had rooted Lola.

'Abhaile,' she said, touching the wall and gazing back at the item on the table. 'Home.'

'Polly has broken out but she's not gone far. She might eat some of the weeds.' Jack tossed his arms around her from behind and cuddled her into his chest, kissed the curve of her neck and breathed against her hair. Lola was not ready for the sensations Jack could trickle off. He placed his hands on her hips. He felt her bottom and then gave it a light tap and then released his hold. 'What did you say to Rockford? He didn't stay long.'

'I mentioned a woman's monthly curse and also that I had received a letter from his wife's family.'

'And did you?'

'I did. They asked me to stay away from him. Well... threatened might be a more adequate explanation. I will reply and reassure them that I'm merely living on his island. They didn't sound like they would miss him or that they were in need of his money. With no heirs they're sure that he'll be looking for one and that, of course, he would want me to use for breeding and therefore I was to stay clear of the Rockford estate.'

'Who said all of this?'

'A consortium of relatives.'

‘Dear God.’

‘Yes. A nice read.’ Lola pointed to the matter on the table.

‘Can I ask about this monthly curse? I don’t want to use up my question just yet though.’

Lola stared. He really didn’t know what she meant. How lucky were the men of the world? They didn’t cramp and bleed for days. ‘I’ll explain that later,’ she said. ‘I’ve come up with a plan that might rid us of Ivan – but you might not agree to it.’

‘Was he here?’

‘No. Thankfully not. If he was, I might have been at the folly. I do spend a lot of time up there. I enjoy being with Mortimer. He is good company. Although, I think he would enjoy having the excuse to shoot Ivan. We caught a wild pig the other day by the way, in one of my snares. Mortimer shot it for practice. We are bleeding it out in the shed but we’ll need it butchered.’

Jack’s face was a picture of admiration and lust.

‘I hear you made a deal with Mortimer?’ Lola asked.

‘I did,’ Jack replied, shrugging. ‘You’re mine. I wanted him to know that. At least I want you to be my woman.’

Lola’s heart leapt. Why did it keep doing that? She didn’t like being possessed. But when Jack showed the slightest of interest she almost danced with joy. It was bordering on pathetic. Jack sat on the stool, spread those lean legs wide and rested his weight on bent elbows. Gosh, he was dashing. His moustache needed trimming but he was damn fine. ‘What has finally made my brave little Lola worried? You look scared,’ he asked again.

‘I am neither worried or scared!’ Lola grinned, and she held a sweaty palm to a hot forehead. ‘We could make love?’ she said, swaying her hips and holding her finger to her pouting lips. ‘You’d like that too?’

‘You’re indeed a temptress,’ Jack said, not moving from the stool. He rubbed his neck and dragged fingers through his hair. Still he said nothing.

Lola breathed deeply and said, ‘I feel so sorry for Mortimer. His father builds a wharf now. After all these years of his only son being here and he never visits. What a selfish man! I’m here only for a few weeks and he comes running without me even asking him to.’

‘You’ve not told him to stay away either,’ Jack said. The set of his disapproving jaw, the cut of his mouth as it pinched inwards, the creases of his disgusted forehead.

‘You were aware of my reputation and yet you persistently want to know things. This is not my fault,’ Lola said and wished that he wouldn’t turn his nose up at her any further. ‘You wanted to make love to me without any commitment or moral union too – so don’t start with lectures or nastiness. If I’m good enough for that then why speak to me this way now?’

Lola looked around for what object she might fling at Jack if he said much more. She had good aim and as the toes of her shoes peeked out from under her swaying skirt, she’d use what was to hand in an emergency. Lola was convinced that Cinderella had used a shoe as an effective weapon and that was the real reason she had only one slipper in the fairy tale.

‘Women don’t normally come with all these complications,’ Jack said.

‘Well, I do,’ Lola said, reaching to remove a shoe. ‘You cannot take bits of me. I am what I am.’

Jack’s head lowered into his hands. Those hands drove Lola wild when they touched her. His manner now was disappointing. There had been promise in their partnership. Something Lola never saw or felt before. It was ebbing away all because of a stupid letter.

‘What was your plan for Ivan?’ Jack asked.

Lola moved backwards slightly. Had she heard him correctly?

‘Before more trouble arrives here on the Sands – what are we to do with existing problems?’ he asked.

‘We let Lord Rockford find Ivan with some guns,’ Lola said, pulling back on the shoe. ‘Ivan was a rebel at some point in his past. If he is caught with a stash of illegal weapons, he’ll be taken directly back to jail.’

‘What stops him from telling them they aren’t his, but a Fitzgerald hoard?’

‘Ivan has lived here for years and never spoke of it before now. With my word, yours, Mortimer’s and Rockford catching him red-handed, there will be little heed put into his protestations.’

Jack laughed. ‘That might just work. You’re right, Lola. You aren’t that stupid after all.’

With one swoop of her skirt, Lola removed her shoe and flung it hard at Jack’s head. He dodged it just in the nick of time.



## Chapter 28

Jack chased Lola out of the cottage and towards the shore. She was a fast runner for a woman in a long skirt and one shoe. The deep sand on the dunes slowed their pace and Lola fell which meant he could leap at those dainty feet. The grip held but she kicked back and fled again. Sand tossed in her wake and she got another advantage. There was no escape unless she went into the sea. Even then, where could she go? When he rounded the last mound of swaying grasses, there was no sign of her skirt or loose hair. There were no footprints in the smooth sand. She had doubled back. The rascal. But when Jack turned a flying object hit him square between the eyes. The pain was sharp and the crack loud. The cursing from Jack turned the air blue. Blood dripped from between his eyes onto shaking hands.

‘Gracious,’ he heard Lola say. ‘I’m sorry. That wasn’t meant to happen.’

He couldn’t see her for he had his eyes tightly closed. He hated the sight of blood – especially his own. Jack touched his forehead and winced. The skin was wet. He felt weak. Could he admit that and not look childish? Possibly not. A fluttering in his heart started and he was seeing stars if he wedged an eye open.

‘I’m woozy,’ he admitted, reaching his arm out, searching for Lola. ‘I might faint.’

Was she laughing? Fingers curled around his own. They were warm and feminine. Lips found him. ‘Sorry,’ Lola whispered. ‘You’re not bleeding badly. It’s a tiny cut. I’m very sorry I hit you too hard with my other shoe.’

Jack let her lead him back towards the cottage. Sunlight peeked through his eyelashes when he prized one eye open at a time. She was telling the truth, there was no new blood when he tipped a finger where the sting was. Hand in hand they walked. How nice that felt. He was plopped onto a chair and a wet cloth dabbed his cut forehead. She wiped carefully around the soreness and then kissed it lightly, apologising again. Jack grabbed either side of her waist and held her belly to his nose. There was the scent of the sea

and Lola.

‘You will stain my dress,’ Lola said but Jack ignored her and hugged a cheek to her breasts. He felt her beating heart.

‘You’re so beautiful,’ Jack said. ‘And you’re a damn good shot.’

He liked to hear Lola laugh. His cock hardened when she ran fingers through his hair and when she caressed the back of his neck. Nuzzling up, his mouth found a nipple pimpled out through the fabric. His tongue encircled it and he sucked. Lola sighed and arched her back, urging him to do that again. He sucked delicately and moved to find the other. The groan was loud and his groin responded immediately. He adjusted his crotch and opened his trousers. His balls were tight as rocks and he moved an instinctive hand over himself a few times as his eyes looked upwards and found Lola staring. ‘You do things to me,’ he said. ‘You drive me to this.’ His head leaned back, his eyes closed and his throat made a noise as he touched himself.

When he looked again, she had opened the front of her dress and chemise. The cleavage of her breasts smelled of musk, her neck was delicious and the softness of her hair fell over his nose. His hands slipped inside and found skin, the soft mound of both breasts and tips fell into each palm. ‘Kiss me,’ he ordered and their need collided in an exploration of mouths. Each hand of his became busy with touching her skin. ‘I need to taste you,’ Jack said, his voice hoarse and not his own as his saliva wetted Lola’s collarbone, nipple, and belly. As the dress was let go and the slip fell to the floor, Jack’s tongue found the triangle of hair and slid there too.

She was sweet as well as salty. The wetness was warm and his mouth insistent. Her hands were around his head and neck. She liked him there and he wished to stay. His cock throbbed in anticipation of going back to where his finger went. With a loud groan, Lola parted her thighs more and Jack’s persistent mouth found a place that made her squirm and pant. He stayed there and sucked, licked and nipped, and a finger entered too. He needed to get her lying down, he needed on top of her soon, but when he glanced upwards Lola was lost in the pleasure of what he was doing. He resumed the rhythm and slipped his finger deeper. The muscles sucked tight around it and it was his turn to groan. He needed inside her properly. He’d ride deep and long into that tight, warm place.

He tilted her toward his mouth and then slid two fingers

forward and upwards. They moved slowly in and out until Lola's hand pushed his mouth aside gently. Her own fingers pressed against the swollen nub and she panted, ground down on his fingers and her own and moaned out a long climax. Women could do that too? It made Jack weak to watch her. His need for her grew to huge proportions. Slowly he removed his fingers and listened to the satisfied sigh.

Standing, he pulled off his clothes and boots and lifted Lola in his arms and walked them to the bed. 'I need inside you now.'

Lola whispered, 'Yes,' and spread her legs. Without guidance or thought Jack found where he was supposed to be. His back arched and he slipped fully into the resistant passage. Over and over he thrust home. Lola grabbed at his back and lifted her legs up and over his thighs and hips. He rode on and she called his name softly at first and then with urgency. His desire responded and suddenly he exploded inside her and cursed loudly with a juddering shiver.

'It gets better every time,' Jack said, breathing heavily. When Lola didn't answer, he propped himself on his elbows, moved her hair back from that beautiful face and looked intently at the woman he wanted and loved. 'Is everything all right?'

Lola's eyes watered. She was upset.

'What's the matter? Did I hurt you?' he asked, trying to make Lola look at him and answer. Her gaze was flitting everywhere and a tear rolled across her cheek and down the side of her lovely nose. 'Lola, talk to me.'

'There's a terrible problem,' Lola said shakily.

'Whatever it is, we will face it together. Fix it together, you with your brains and me with my cock.' Jack tried to make her laugh. 'It'll be fine. Whatever it is.'

'No. It's bad. Really awful,' Lola said, trying to get out from under him. Jack refused to move. 'Please let me up.'

'Not until you tell me what's wrong.'

'I'm in love with you,' Lola cried. The sob was funny. It made Jack laugh and this made Lola cry even more. 'Don't...'

'Oh my darling,' Jack said, kissing her cheek, the side of her neck and then her lips. Tenderly and then eagerly. 'I love you too! That's not a problem. That's wonderful news, a ghrá. Why on earth are you crying?'

'I'm done for. Don't you see? I cannot love one man. You'll leave me or let me down. I cannot love you, Jack C Fitzgerald.'

‘I’m really that bad?’

Lola snuffled. ‘You’re so handsome and young. You’ve no idea how hard it is living with Lola de Lacy. I should know, I put up with her every day. Love is not enough. We’ll never survive. I’ll die of a broken heart. I swore I’d never fall for an unsuitable man. I’ve been so careful, but you snook up on me. I think I fell for you that first time I saw you in that blessed boat.’

Jack rolled off Lola and he was bolt upright in the bed. ‘Unsuitable?’ he asked, his voice high-pitched. ‘Unsuitable? You mean poor?’

‘Don’t. Don’t make me even sadder.’ Lola’s tears streamed. ‘I just cannot love any man. It’s impossible.’

‘That makes no sense!’

‘I’ve been trained to stay focused. To not care. To do my job. I’m not supposed to fall in love!’ Lola thumped the bed. ‘I’m losing myself and it shouldn’t have happened.’

‘You loved me when you first saw me?’ Jack asked, beaming at her words and tears. ‘You’re losing yourself and you love me? How can you be sad about this? Lola, you’re unbelievable.’

‘It’s happening,’ Lola cried. ‘It’s really happening. I’m a love-sick fool. The very kind of woman I laugh at. What am I going to do now?’

‘Kiss me,’ Jack said. ‘That’s my solution. Whenever there is a crisis and you don’t know what to do, just kiss me.’

He leaned in to find her plump lips with his own. Lola surrendered. She felt tired and shaky in his arms but she returned his passion. Lola’s scent when naked was fresh and smooth like her skin. Jack couldn’t get enough of that smell or the sensations it gave him. Each touch started a tingle, each breath brought them closer. It was inevitable that he’d rise again and sink inside where she asked him to go. The bed creaked and they both groaned and thrust in a growing rhythm.

When Lola sat on top of him, Jack felt all of her sink onto all of him. The depths were beyond anything he’d ever felt. Then she held the brass bedstead and rose and fell. His tip right to the bottom of his shaft disappeared into heaven. Lola moved expertly, driving him closer and closer to the edge. He held her hips and glided her up and down savouring each delve and each rise.

‘Come to me,’ Lola said. And as he watched her breasts bounce, he did as she asked.

‘I love you,’ Jack said, willing her to reply and to look as happy as he felt.

‘I love you, too, Jack C Fitzgerald,’ Lola said and there were no tears this time. ‘We truly are perfect together.’

Jack leaned back against the pillow and sighed. ‘For once we agree on something.’

## Chapter 29

Jack was on the roof fixing the small leak and the evening was falling in. The biting insects he called 'midges' were circling and Lola heard him smack them against his skin. Polly was back and munching grass, looking upwards at Jack's antics on the roof too. There were loud curses and thumps and Lola couldn't help but laugh at the giving out he was doing to the roof and his tools.

'If you want us to stay dry in the next rain, then stop wasting your breath and work. But, I've made porridge,' Lola called up. 'Come and get it.'

Setting out the table for them, Lola stood and took a long, hard look at her life. Who was she becoming? She had a goat in the garden. A man fixing her roof. She had made porridge and she was making love regularly with the same man. Lola was almost married again. Was this in her great scheme for life?

'It's done,' Jack said, coming in to wash his hands in the water from the new jug on the washstand. 'Mortimer gave you a few things I see.'

'He's kind. I should have invited him to dinner,' Lola said, looking out the door towards the folly.

'I want it to be just us,' Jack said. 'Selfish I know but there's going to be many times in the next few days and weeks when we won't be alone. I can feel them coming. Rockford, the men on the pier, it's going to get busy.'

'I only want you too,' Lola said and patted Jack's back on the way past him to sit. 'I can tell that you're worried.'

'Patrick and Michael will be back soon too,' Jack groaned. 'And the dog. I might suggest she stay here with you? Would you like that?'

'Rua?' she asked, smiling broadly. 'Yes please. She'll be good company.'

'I'll call to Ivan later and try to set up that plan of yours,' Jack said. 'I think we should tell Mortimer what we're doing.'

Lola touched the brand mark on her arm. Her husband had done that to her on the night they eloped. How naive was she to think he

was possessive because he was in love. When he died she'd almost tried to remove it herself but she didn't. It served as a reminder to her to stay independent and free. There was also something evil in a man who had to permanently scar another human with their dominance. Had Edmund not died she would have most definitely murdered him.

'Ivan marked Mortimer. Carved his initials into Mortimer's skin,' Lola said to Jack and both of them stopped eating. Her stomach turned slightly when she thought of the pain inflicted and of how everyday she's reminded of it. 'Ivan did it with a knife. On a child. I think on that when I feel guilty for setting him up. Mortimer also fears that Mrs B was poisoned by Ivan.'

'Lola!' Jack was flabbergasted. 'Marked? And poisoned our Mrs B?'

'Yes. I got rid of the rest of the poteen in case you are looking for it. Do you think Ivan is capable of using it to poison Mrs B?'

Jack rubbed his chin and thought. 'He most certainly is. She became very weak. Her hair started to fall out and she had nosebleeds. Then a cough started and a wheeze. Could that be poisoning?'

'I'd need to look it up in a book or ask a physician,' Lola said. 'But from what I know of plants, it could easily be poisoning. But Mrs B must've suspected it herself? Didn't she say anything?'

'No! And the sicker she got the more she drank from the Irish medicine bottle,' Jack said with venom. 'We'll fix Ivan then. We've more reason than ever! The swine.'

'Mortimer feels bad for not spotting it. It was only when he thought about it all that her illness seemed strange. The poor man, the guilt is tripping him. You're right, Jack, Mortimer will not protect Ivan – that's a certainty.'

'I should go check on our store in the caves,' Jack said absent-mindedly. 'Ivan isn't nimble at his age but I worry he's snooping.'

'So that's the hiding place. I thought you buried them?' Lola elbowed Jack in jest.

'Sometimes we do. I'll go to the caves and then see Ivan. There's work needs to be done. If I stay here we'll end up back in that nest of a bed over there. What are you going to do?'

Lola looked around. 'I should take some clothes to the stream for washing so they could dry in the sunshine tomorrow. I could take some of yours?'

Jack howled laughing. 'The face you made. You don't want to do my washing!' He laughed again. 'You poor thing. The thought of it will bring you out in hives. Imagine you being an ordinary woman doing her man's washing.'

Lola was barefoot, there was nothing to fling. She started bundling up her belongings and refused to join in the laughter even though he was right and she had almost cried at the thought of the domesticity that was continually falling on her.

Jack kissed the back of her tense neck and felt her bottom. 'I'll be back soon. Enjoy your time at the stream.' His lips touched her ear and his breath made a shiver trickle down her back. 'I love you.'

Lola went in one direction and he in the other. With full arms Lola fumbled at the bundle and cursed to herself. She should have tied them all in a large shawl but, instead, they were dropping one by one on the path and she had to retrace her steps and then she dropped some more. Lola was not cut out for this normal life.

The stream was not as full flowing. The clouds were not dispensing their tears on the bogland and they weren't trickling down to meet the sea. Lola stared, almost willing the large pools and babbling noises to begin. This washing was going to take time and patience and Lola was not in the mood. Deciding to wash the smallest garments in the cleanest, deepest pool would have to suffice. The heather held the chemise and petticoat. Her thinnest chemise was almost dry before she was ready to leave. The day was still sweltering. Polly would have escaped again to find shade and who could blame her. Lola had not worn her bonnet and her face was red and wet by the time she made it back to the path home.

There were voices, and fixing her hair and the front of her dress was all Lola managed before over the brow of the hill came Lord Rockford, Patrick and Michael and Rua the dog.

Rua bounded forward. Delighted at being back on the Sands, he knocked Lola right off her feet. All the men raced forward to find a mortified woman, sweating and lying on the flat of her back.

Patrick picked Lola up like she was a twig and placed her in a standing position. Shocked Lola smiled broadly. 'Fredrick,' she panted. 'What on earth are you doing here again? And I've just come from sorting my washing. I am not respectable enough for visitors.'

'Lola,' he said and bowed low and grabbed her hand in both of his. He kissed it passionately for a few seconds too long. Patrick



shuffled uncomfortably backwards and Michael coughed and called Rua to him.

Lola asked, 'Perhaps we might send the men on ahead. They might make sure the goat has not gotten into the house?'

Michael nodded, pulling Rua and Patrick with him up the path towards Beatty's cottage.

Lola stood in the blaring sunshine with hands on hips and said, 'I told you that I'm not able to make decisions yet. I need time and your patience!' She wasn't going to make coming here easy for him.

'This is about another matter.' He panted, wiping his brow with a large handkerchief. 'I've been getting correspondence.' There was another dab at his perspiration. 'I need your advice and counsel, might we go indoors?'

Men were exasperating. Lola stood and droplets of sweat fell down her back. This was unusual heat for Ireland even though it was the end of April. The tension was literally boiling.

'You do know that your son Mortimer is here on the Sands too?' Lola said.

'That is one of the matters I need your wisdom on,' he said slowly. His age was showing. He looked wrinkled and perplexed.

'I need to speak up for Mortimer – even if you're angry. Something needs to be said about your son on his behalf! I like being here and I am content, but this rift between you two is hard to witness.'

His eyebrows went high. 'Content? I was almost lynched on the pier! Wherever you go, there is always chaos.' He was pulling at his garments to get some air between the fabric and his skin and he was straightening his wig. 'Might you come with me whenever I go to see him?'

'I normally visit him at around this time,' Lola said walking forward. 'He's a wonderful artist and he's painting my portrait.'

Their footsteps stopped in the shade of a whin bush. 'What is he like?' he asked and Lola saw tears in the determined man's eyes. 'Is he like me?'

Lola gulped back emotion. He was sincere. Mortimer was going to be so very happy. Lola touched his arm. 'You are a silly fool,' she whispered. 'A sweltered fool. Let's get you inside and get you some water.'

Lola let him follow her inside the cottage. There was no sign of Jack. Lola breathed a sigh of relief. Lord Rockford whipped off his

wig, jacket and waistcoat and pulled at the shirt to release it from the sweat on his chest.

His stare fell to the unmade bed and the dresser, the washstand and the fireplace.

‘You must promise to visit your son and be kind to his situation. You must take him from this place,’ Lola said.

‘I heard that he is not well.’

‘If you mean healthy? He’s fine in body but he is very damaged. He’s been badly treated by the schoolmaster you employed.’

‘Tallon was bad to the boy? I finally gave in to read some of the recent correspondence. It broke my heart. He is damaged you say?’

‘The boy is twenty years old now. A fine young man. Artistic and kind. He craves love and affection and a normal life. Do you want a brandy?’ Lola said. ‘I have a good bottle here but you’ll have to drink from a cup.’

‘Please.’ He held the cup aloft and examined it. ‘Is it clean?’ he asked.

‘Probably not.’ Lola asked, ‘Did you set Mrs Beatty up here to come check on your son? My friend and nurse, Mrs Beatty?’

Lord Rockford tried to look uncertain, but she could guess the truth. Yet again, a man was lying to Lola de Lacy.

# Chapter 30

There was a foul stench coming from Tallon's house as Jack approached the door. The thick panes in the window were unclean and there was nothing but thorny brambles as he tried to see inside. Holding his mouth and nose helped keep out some of the smell but there was no answer to the insistent rapping he was doing on the door. He tried the latch and it opened. The pong was fierce when the air inside met the outside draught. Jack gagged.

The buzzing of flies and the otherwise eerie silence made Jack peer into the shadows of the room. There in a chair lay a slumped body. Jack took two brave steps forward for even in this gloom the sight was not pleasant. Ivan Tallon's throat was open from ear to ear and his head was flopped back at an angle. His eyes were closed, his mouth open and the wound congealed.

Jack retraced his steps but stumbled over a large, unloaded rifle near the door. The sight and smell was overwhelming. Jack was used to death and dying – but not murder. He gripped the rifle tightly but the sight didn't leave his eyes even though he was in the fresh air. Jack retched into the brambles and had to sit on a grassy patch near the path to the house. The smell was still strong in his nostrils and he wiped the rifle down with his shirt tails. He breathed deeply, thanking the angels for his lungs and beating chest. His mind raced through all the possibilities. All of his imaginings were wild and yet someone had murdered this man. But who?

From memory, Patrick had seen him recently. Had Lola met him since the time she arrived? She never mentioned it. The Lord of the Sands would have had plenty of opportunity to do this. Was Mortimer capable of this violence? Was anyone? Seanín Childs and he never spoke or Jack never heard them say anything civil to each other. Why would Childs slit a man's throat? Might Ivan Tallon's past have caught up with him?

Jack was going towards his small stash of guns in the caves beyond the lighthouse. Something told him that the weapon in his grasp which he had taken from Tallon's house was one from his

own crates.

Seanín was by his rowing boat on the shore. Jack saw the *Fair Lass* bobbing merrily at anchor in the calm water. She shouldn't be left for long. She was too precious. How fine she looked even without her dress of red sails. 'I've come to check on the merchandise,' he said to Childs who stopped his work sanding the boat's upturned keel. 'The tide will be out soon and I'll get to climb up to the cave.'

Childs said, 'I saw your lads bring a man in a wig ashore. Who was that?'

Jack blinked against the blinding sun and what Childs had said.

'I saw him with my spyglass. He's possibly come to see the Temptress?'

'Or the schoolmaster?' Jack said, watching Childs closely but there was no sign that he was concerned about visitors to Tallon's house. 'Have you seen Ivan recently? I was thinking of going up there to have a word. Is there much point? Do you think he's a man you can bargain with?'

'Bargain with?' Seanín asked. 'Is he looking to strike bargains?'

'Ivan must have a spyglass too,' Jack warned. 'Why was this empty rifle in his house and not in the caves? Did he not say anything to you about seeing things on the Sands?'

'Never!' Seanín snapped a little too quickly. Was he lying? Perhaps.

'Did Ivan threaten you too?' Jack tried.

'About what?' Seanín replied, returning to his job with gusto. 'I never talked to the man. That fellow in the wig has been here a while. I saw herself take him towards the folly. Let's hope the Lord of the Sands has some clothes on, eh?'

'I want to go into the caves,' Jack said, marching towards the rocks.

'What's all the sudden interest in the caves. Have you tired of humping the Temptress?' he called after Jack.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Jack shouted. He could hear Seanín scrambling off the upturned boat and across the sand after him.

'The tide's not fully out,' Seanín said at Jack's side. 'I wouldn't go in there if I were you.'

Jack stopped walking and looked down on the smaller man's freckles. He was sweating and pinked from the sun. 'It's dangerous.

You know that,' he said. 'And I have to tell you something. I was out there and I had to take a few of the stash for myself. That's probably where that one in your fist came from. I took a few.'

'What?' Jack said, standing back to eye Seanín suspiciously. 'You took a few? Why?'

Seanín's hand went to his belt behind his back and he unsheathed a long working blade. It glinted in the sun.

Jack stood back even further. 'What in the name of God are you doing?'

Seanín started to stammer. 'I cannot let you go out there.'

'We've always had a deal,' Jack said slowly. 'You helped us. I don't mind a few things going missing for a reason, but you should have asked.'

There was a swipe of the blade through the air. Seanín meant to hurt him.

'What the fuck are you doing?' Jack asked, keeping an eye on the blade.

'You were supposed to be busy with the Temptress for another while,' he stuttered. 'You weren't supposed to want to see the stash. Not yet! But, oh no! You had to come nosing around.'

'It's my merchandise. I have a use for it,' Jack said slowly and carefully. 'It's mine. I cannot see why you've pulled a knife on me.'

'You'd have it off me in a shot,' Childs said. 'I know that, too, but I cannot let you into those caves. Not until I figure things out.'

'Is it all gone? Did you take them all?' Jack asked.

Seanín sweated, panic-stricken.

'You wouldn't do this alone,' Jack said. 'What the hell is going on?'

'It was Ivan who did it,' Seanín said with a gulp as he gripped the blade tighter.

'Ivan took these rifles?'

'It was all him. He took it all. He said it would only be a few now and again and that we'd spilt the profits. I didn't think he'd be so stupid as to take the lot. I promise you, Jack, I didn't know he'd take the whole hoard. It wasn't to be like this.'

'Let's go see the schoolmaster, so?' Jack said. 'Let's get him to tell his side of things.'

'NO!' Seanín cried. 'No. I'm telling you, Jack! I didn't know he was going to ruin us. I swear.'

Jack moved and there was a swipe from the long blade again. It

missed but angered Jack into thumping Seanín square across the jaw with the butt of the rifle. The knock hurt his own hand and knocked Seanín clean off his feet. In one grab Jack had the blade and was standing with it at Seanín's throat. 'Please don't,' the man begged. 'We go back a long way.'

'Did you give Tallon the same mercy?' Jack asked.

'No.' Seanín sobbed. 'He deserved it, Jack. He wouldn't tell me what he did with the rest of them and he laughed in my face.'

'So, you slit his throat?' Jack asked, vomit rising into his mouth at the mess he'd just witnessed. 'And left him to rot?'

'I couldn't move him. I tried but I didn't know what to do. I was afraid that I'd be seen moving the corpse. Even at night.' His pathetic crying continued. 'If I found where he put the guns, I thought I could put them back and maybe someone else would be blamed for the killing. Like the Lord of the Sands? I know it was wrong of me but I was scared for my soul as well as my freedom. I'm going to hell.' He blessed himself.

'Where did the guns go?' Jack asked.

'I've no idea.' Seanín's hands went aloft as Jack stuck the blade in tighter to his gullet. 'He gave me a few shillings to keep quiet and he made sure it was done when the Lord of the Sands and the Temptress were busy at the folly. That's all I know. I was to get my share but, of course, he had no intention of that. I was a fool. A stupid fool. I was sure that wiggled man today was going to find me out and I was right. He's come to buy the weapons from you?'

Jack peered towards Beatty's and then the folly. Lola wasn't sure of where Ivan lived. They'd never gone there. Whoever was with Lola might not be taken to Ivan's house. If it was Lord Rockford, and he was doing the rounds of the island, he might possibly want to speak with Ivan Tallon. Jack pulled a hand through his hair. He was sweating. Why was he, too, starting to think that the Sands was definitely cursed?

'What are you going to do with me?' Seanín asked. 'You know I'm a good man. Ivan was the one who stole from you. I just turned a blind eye to it. I know I should have come to you but I didn't think it would get to this. I didn't think I'd have to kill a man!' He was on his knees whispering prayers and wringing his hands.

Jack couldn't get his thoughts in order. He kicked lightly at the man on the ground. 'Whist. I cannot think.'

'You know I'm a good man,' Seanín continued to mutter.

‘How did he think he’d get away with it?’ Jack said aloud. ‘How did he think we’d not notice?’

‘He was sure that you would have given up the stash for the Temptress. That’s what he thought. He’d bargain with you for the hoard he’d already taken, but it seemed like you weren’t in a hurry to keep her honour intact. He was worried and couldn’t get you alone. When I pressed him he said he’d go to Rockford instead. I panicked, for if Rockford knows about the rebel guns, then we’re all sunk. We’d all hang.’ There was another wail or two and Jack’s mind stalled on him yet again. ‘Rockford must never know. He’d kill us all. The Temptress included. She would be seen to know something too.’

Jack’s mouth went dry. Lola would know what to do. She’d see through all of this debacle and find a simple, sensible solution. The blade lowered and Seanín let out a relieved sigh. ‘We’re going to have to move Tallon’s body and bury it somewhere. Wait until it gets dark. No arguments from you. I’ll talk to Lola and the Lord of the Sands if I have to. But take something to put up your nose for the smell is bad. We’ll do it at dusk. I’ll be back for you later.’

‘Thank you.’ Seanín grabbed at Jack’s sleeve. ‘I am sorry.’

‘This is not over. Not by a long shot. And don’t even think of rowing for the mainland. You’d not get far alone and I’ll find you and kill you myself.’

‘My boat’s not fit to move anyhow,’ he admitted, crestfallen. ‘I’ll do as you say, Jack.’

‘Be here when I get back.’

The sun beat down as Jack made for Beatty’s cottage. His father and Michael were both snoozing and sunning themselves in the middle of the yard’s weeds. In hushed whispers he filled them in on his hour away.

Patrick blessed himself. Michael turned pale.

‘Lola is with Lord Rockford up at the folly,’ Patrick said when Jack stopped to breathe. ‘Could things get any more complicated?’

‘Lola will know what to do,’ Jack said. ‘She’ll fix this.’

Patrick rolled his eyes. ‘This is what you get for bringing that Temptress to the Sands.’

# Chapter 31

There wasn't much need for introductions. Lord Rockford and Mortimer had fallen into an embrace immediately. Lola retreated from the folly and closed the door. This was a time for father and son. She said a prayer to Mrs Beatty to guide things along. The shells were tinkling in the breeze and Lola sat in the sun chair and waited on the visiting rabbit. How had he managed to avoid the snares?

There was a whistle. Lola cocked her ear. There it came again. A low man's whistle. She sat upright and peered around. There it was again. The oak saplings few leaves fluttered as she passed them and as she rounded the bend she saw Michael, Patrick and Jack. All were tanned from the sun and their black hair shiny.

Jack's grip on her wrist told her something was up. 'Can you come with us?' he asked in a low voice.

'I suppose,' Lola said, glancing back while Jack practically dragged her after them. A few feet further along she insisted they stop and dug in her heels to the dirt. 'What is it?' she asked.

'Ivan Tallon has been murdered and the guns are all away, Seanín Childs did it,' Jack said in one breath. 'And before you think this is a good thing, we cannot have Seanín explaining to the authorities why he murdered the schoolmaster now, can we?'

'This is not a good day for a lord to be on the Sands,' Michael chirped in. 'Is he going to be here long?'

With that there was a loud bang that sounded like a gunshot. There were raised voices and someone calling out. All four of them ran towards the commotion to find the lord racing towards them, followed by a running Mortimer in a state of undress wielding a pistol. The lord hid amongst the group and panted, 'My own son just tried to shoot me!'

Mortimer stopped and Lola stood forward, her arm outstretched for the weapon. 'No,' Mortimer said. 'No. He said that he won't take me from here.'

'Not today.' His father gulped. 'I said just not right this minute. I'll need to put things in place. Make arrangements.'



‘You’ve had twenty years!’ Mortimer shouted and the veins on his neck protruded. ‘Why come just for a visit? Why now?’ Mortimer looked at Lola and back to his trembling father. ‘Did you come to see her? Did she make you come?’ His pistol was now pointed at Lola. ‘Is that it? You came for her but thought you’d pop by to see your bastard son?’

‘I came for you both,’ he lied.

‘He didn’t read my letters,’ Mortimer said to Lola. ‘He didn’t bother.’

‘I was pained by them.’

‘What do you know about pain?’ Mortimer scoffed. ‘I’ve had this argument over and over with you in my mind and here you are and I can think of nothing to say.’

‘Mortimer will get ready to leave, with my help, we will get ready to go. Will we say in two weeks we will be ready? Is that enough time for you to get Mortimer a nice place to live in London?’ Lola asked.

He nodded profusely. ‘Indeed. Yes. Yes. Yes.’

‘And I will be *your son*?’ Mortimer asked, embarrassed suddenly by the audience. ‘You will introduce me as your son.’

Lord Rockford glanced at Lola, his mouth open, his wig lopsided.

‘One step at a time, Mortimer. You’ll need to get to know one another. He’ll need to prove his loyalty again. He will start by promising to visit you regularly in London and learn more about your art. And you will promise not to shoot at him again.’ Lola chuckled to ease the tension. ‘Agreed?’

Mortimer reluctantly nodded and Lord Rockford sighed in relief.

‘You should go now,’ Jack said. ‘The tide might be right for a quick passage.’ He winked at Lord Rockford who made a grateful tap on Jack’s arm. Mortimer turned on his heel and disappeared into the undergrowth back to the folly.

‘I’ll check on him later,’ Lola promised as she linked the lord’s arm. ‘Walk with me,’ she said. All the men did as she told them to. ‘There is another problem,’ she said, taking small steps. ‘Mortimer’s schoolmaster has been found. This is rather distressing. My men here have just brought news that he is dead.’

Lord Rockford didn’t look all that perturbed until Lola said, ‘His throat was cut.’

There was a flash of many questions in quick succession and

Lord Rockford looked back from whence they came. 'Mortimer told me of Tallon's cruelty.'

'Did he show you the mark?' Lola asked.

'He did. Who cut Tallon's throat?' He glanced back towards the folly again. 'Ivan Tallon never revealed to me how miserable Mortimer was. How their relationship was soured. He never warned me that the boy had issues. But, I never thought it would come to this.'

Lola lowered her head.

'Ivan was particularly vicious. None of us liked him,' Jack said. 'We tolerated him but none of us will be sorry that he's gone to hell.'

'Who is to blame?' He clutched at Lola's arm. 'Who?'

'He made advances,' Lola said, her cheeks flushed. 'I was worried. I mentioned it to Mortimer. He also harbours the notion that Tallon poisoned Mrs Beatty.'

'Sweet Jesus.' The lord's face was ashen. 'We must hide this. Can we hide what Mortimer did? Jesus Christ himself must have sent me here today to keep my son safe from any more harm. Can you help me, Lola? Can we trust these men to help us? No one must know of Mortimer's anger.'

'Of course!' Lola smiled sweetly. 'Leave this all to me. He'll come to no more harm now that I am here. We'll fix this and never speak of it again. Tallon will not be missed and if he is, you can say that you sent him away to the colonies or elsewhere.'

'Indeed, yes. These men brought him away for me in their boat. I must see the body. I must. Can you take me there?' he asked Jack. 'The lady must stay away, though, and we'll discuss the best way of sorting this predicament man to man.'

Lola gritted teeth as she watched them leave. Jack looked back and waved. There was pride in his face but Lola had betrayed Mortimer. To keep Jack safe she'd let a friend take the blame for something he didn't do. If Seanín Childs was indeed the murderer, he would walk free. This was not good. The folly was empty when she returned. She sat in the sun chair and waited. She called his name a few times and then gave up and returned to find the Fitzgeralds and Lord Rockford in the cottage.

'I went to look for your son,' Lola said. 'He is a good man, whatever has happened here today. He deserves to leave here and be part of a family.'

‘You need to leave this place too,’ Lord Rockford said, mopping his neck and forehead with a cloth. ‘There was some sight in that awful place he called home. These men will bury him somewhere and say some prayers. I’ve tried to buy their silence but they don’t seem to want anything.’

‘I think we are all just glad to see the back of Ivan Tallon,’ Lola said. ‘They’ll give their word not to speak of it. For my sake too. The mob on the shore will blame the evil Temptress for this death on top of everything else. We’ll all stay quiet and if there are any questions, you’ve employed him elsewhere.’

‘His sister may be the only one to care,’ Rockford said.

‘Where is she?’ Lola asked, trying not to sound too interested.

‘Rockford House. She still works in my kitchen.’

‘You mean to say that Mortimer’s mother was that close by all these years and she never came out here to see him?’

‘No one must know that she is the mother of the Lord of the Sands. She’s a woman who worries about her reputation.’ Rockford’s face shone with pride. ‘She is a devout woman.’

‘And Mortimer must not know that she was only miles away in the comfort of Rockford House.’ Lola’s head was about to explode with anger. ‘Imagine what he would do if he knew this?’

‘I cared for them both as best as I could,’ Lord Rockford said, holding his chest.

Lola wanted to spit at his feet. If he cared so much why had he failed them both. It was pitiful.

‘You should go now,’ Jack said, bobbing his non-existent cap. ‘If you don’t mind me saying you should leave now on the tide.’

‘But really, I do think it would be safer for Mortimer to remain here for the foreseeable future. So long as he doesn’t do any harm to you, my dear?’ Lord Rockford said.

Lola noticed that he wasn’t much bothered about Mortimer or her own fate as he scurried to the landing place. There was only one consolation. He would not be back any time soon and Ivan Tallon would be buried by the morning.

## Chapter 32

Even in the cool of the evening, it was hot, heavy work digging a grave for the schoolmaster. Jack had stood back a few times and leant on the shovel, letting Seanín do a few extra shovelfuls. And he didn't feel one bit guilty about it. One thing that did bother him, though, was that the Lord of the Sands did nothing to deserve being blamed for Tallon's murder. Lola, too, felt bad about it for she cried on Jack's shoulder and said, 'I'm crying again. These Sands are definitely cursed. I never cry anywhere else.'

'And did Lord Rockford not want to visit Tallon?' Seanín asked, looking for a breather from the digging.

'Get to digging before I lose my patience.'

'I do appreciate this, Jack,' Seanín said. 'It was in a fit of rage and I've asked God's forgiveness.'

'There's only three things I'm going to ask in return,' Jack said. 'Firstly, you are to help get rid of these Temptress rumours. Your wife is the main mouth for them and you can do your best to stop her spreading such nonsense. Secondly, you never steal from anyone again. Thirdly, you'll continue to be silent about the happenings on the Sands.'

'Of course! I'll do anything you ask. I owe you my life, Jack Fitzgerald. Many a man would murder me right then and there. The Brotherhood might not be as understanding. Are you going to tell them what happened?'

The sound of the shovel on earth gave Jack the shivers. He recalled Lola didn't like that sound either. He could see why.

'Will they know about my part in this?' Seanín asked from the growing hole. 'I'd appreciate it if they just heard Tallon worked alone.'

'Otherwise, you know that the Brothers would be getting you to dig another of these for yourself. I'll see how it goes. I'll make no promises.' Jack was hard. His allies were not fond of excuses and this fecker down the hole was the cause of the worry in his stomach.

The night was darkening and Lola was waiting on him home and

this alone propelled him to dig more and a bit faster. He could still smell the body even though it was many feet away in the makeshift cart Patrick had built. Getting the body into the hole was going to be fun. There was no way he wanted to touch it any more than necessary and he really wanted to leave Seanín to the rest but he didn't trust him to finish the job properly.

Then in the gloom he saw a figure. It was Mortimer. Jack waved for although he wasn't sure if it was the Lord of the Sands, there was no one else it could be. How might they explain the hole, and if he happened to come closer, there would be no explaining the smell. Life had come to a very low ebb when a man had to worry about the stench of rotting flesh. The figure moved off and Jack resumed his digging.

Lola was in bed asleep when he returned to Beatty's. The dog padded out to greet him and it was nice to ruffle between her ears. He hoped he didn't smell as bad as he thought he did. Rua didn't sniff him too much and he took the blanket to the floor in front of the unlit grate. Rua lay beside him and Jack made do with her for comfort. Lying with Lola seemed wrong until he could cleanse himself fully in the sea or the stream. The whole process had shaken him deeply. Being alone with Seanín was also scary. If he killed once, he could easily do it again. The weasel showed no remorse other than regret at getting caught. That also bothered Jack. A man should worry for his mortal soul. Especially one who pretended to be so pious.



\* \* \*

Jack rose early before Lola wakened so he might wash and clean himself of the past twenty-four hours. The stream was running low and Lola's garments were fluttering in the morning wind. The dew was thick but he lifted the light fabric and felt it against his cheek.

A shave with the cutthroat blade took him no time at all and a last splash of water made him feel alive again. Rockford wanting Lola as his own was the only thing left sticking in his throat when he swallowed. That and her not being able to leave the Sands were the only worries left.

There would be anger about the missing weapons but there was nothing to be done about that now. The new shipment was due soon and they'd have to make do until he could find out where Tallon had sent the other crates. Perhaps he'd even sold them to the same source. Right now, Jack didn't care so much about the Irish cause. There were more pressing matters at hand.

Rua bounded out to meet him having refused to follow him on his way out. Lola was brushing her hair and as he came into the room she turned around. In the light she looked more radiant than he'd even seen her. His desire for her seemed to grow daily. With lords calling, it was going to be harder and harder to keep her interest. Yet, she was adamant last night before he left to bury the body, that she loved him.

'You are so beautiful,' he said to her now. 'I am the luckiest man.'

Lola smiled with her mouth but it didn't reach her eyes.

'Mortimer saw us digging last night,' Jack said. 'I felt terrible about the whole thing. I feel dirty and that's why I didn't get into our bed. I felt like I might stink of evil deeds.'

'What a mess!' Lola said. 'I'm going to make some loaves of bread. I'll take one to Mortimer.'

'What for?' Jack asked, sounding jealous. 'If you go to him now you'll only feel obliged to tell him about Ivan.'

'I aim to tell him everything,' Lola said.

'I forbid it!' Jack said and instantly bit his lip. 'You cannot do that. He'll tell his father it wasn't him.'

'Leave it to me,' Lola said. 'Have I not sorted things thus far?'

'I suppose,' he muttered.

'His father saw first-hand the damage his neglect has caused. He'll be forced to take responsibility for Mortimer now. I'll see to that.'

There was not much point in arguing with a woman and definitely not much point in crossing swords with her when she wore that mood so tightly.

'And what if Mortimer doesn't agree to take the blame for Ivan's

death?' Jack asked. 'What then?'

'Then Seanín Childs goes to the gallows.'

'And so do I,' Jack said, slapping the table with his palm. 'For covering it up and for supplying arms to Irish rebels. You've no great love for Seanín but I hope that you love me?'

'Is it right that I let a father assume that his son is a murderer?'

'The word there is "assume". We said nothing. He made the leap.'

'Still. It isn't right – or fair to Mortimer,' Lola said. 'It was wrong of me.'

He would have to convince Lola that the situation could not be reversed now. This was her doing, and although it was a genius move, he would never tell her that. And she must know that they can't go backwards on the version of events.

'We've sorted out some of the main problems once and for all,' Jack said, 'now, we just need to find a bride for Lord Rockford.' Jack saw Lola's eyes. 'When I say "we", I mean to say – *you* have sorted the main problems and now *you* just have to find him another woman. You're clever but there is still work to be done to sort out your mess.'

'My mess?'

'Aren't you supposed to be good at this kind of thing?' Jack's tone was hard and his heart heavy. The body of Tallon was still before him when he blinked. The awfulness clouded his mood with bitter fog. 'You are the Temptress. So find someone else to tempt Lord Rockford.'

'Perhaps I'll want him for myself?' Lola said. There was that defiant air she pulled on like a cloak. 'Perhaps I'll convince a well-dressed and wealthy man to take me to the mainland and there'll be no need of piers or men who speak badly to me. I could find myself a gentleman.'

Jack's back tensed and he held the side of the chair. He would not take the bait of another argument. He would not do it. She was attempting to mix the ingredients for bread. She was awkward and uncertain and Jack couldn't help himself. 'If you're hoping to appease Mortimer, maybe take him some of my brandy instead of the bread you're going to burn!'

Lola flung the whole wooden bowl from the table and went to remove her shoe. She got it caught in the tail of her dress and Jack got away.

‘Damn dresses and damn you to hell, Jack C Fitzgerald!’ Lola called after him as a frightened Rua joined him.

Jack was sure that he would not return and apologise. There was no way he’d give in. He took off towards the caves instead. The dog panted at his heels.

‘She’s the most infuriating woman,’ he told Rua. ‘I promised myself I wouldn’t let this happen, but look at me!’

The Lord of the Sands was swimming. Jack could see his head bobbing about close to the shore. He waved. It was the polite thing to do. There was a hand raised back. Not many boatmen could swim. If you were to drown it was considered easier to die if you didn’t try and swim. Jack never saw the logic in this and so himself and Michael were powerful movers in the water. Patrick refused to learn and foretold that he would succumb to the deep. Mortimer was a strong man. He waded ashore and Jack refused to look below his waist.

‘Everything all right?’ Mortimer asked, dripping on the sand and pulling hands over his long, slick hair. ‘Is Lola well?’

‘She is cross with me,’ Jack admitted with a scoff. ‘I was going to go to the caves and check on my hoard.’

‘But Ivan stole it and you killed him?’ Mortimer said matter-of-factly. ‘You buried him last night.’

Jack’s hands went to his hips. ‘How did you know that?’ he asked slowly.

‘I’m not living on the moon,’ Mortimer replied. ‘He deserved all that was coming to him.’

‘Your father asked to see him. But he was dead,’ Jack said. ‘We weren’t sure what to do.’

‘And he just left without seeing him?’ Mortimer asked.

What was Mortimer thinking now? Jack searched his face for clues. There were very few. He would be good at cards. ‘I think we all painted a rather bleak picture of the Sands for him,’ Jack said.

‘Then he will realise how much I want to leave. Thank you, Jack. In return for your help, I think I may know where Tallon hid your stash. It’s in his poteen shebeen at the bottom of Túr Hill. He kept anything of value to him there. It’s well hidden, but I can take you there.’

Jack was stunned. Mortimer moved to leave and guilt poked Jack to speak. ‘Thank you, Mortimer. I want you to know, though, that I think your father may have leaped to the wrong conclusion...



what I'm trying to say is, that your father... after you tried to shoot him, may have thought that...' Jack couldn't say it, he opened his mouth to try again. No. It was terrible. Lola was right, they had done a terrible thing.

'Are you trying to confess something?' Mortimer asked.

'I suppose that I am.' Jack pulled at his nose in exasperation. 'Lola is on her way to tell you what happened. She might do a better job than me.'

'I know Seanín murdered Ivan,' Mortimer said with a chuckle. 'I wish I'd had the gumption to do it years ago. Stop looking so guilt-stricken. You should have taken credit for killing the brute. I would have!' Mortimer moved to leave.

Jack stood in his way and Mortimer thrust his hand forward to shake Jack's. 'Let me thank you properly, my friend. Thank you for burying the beast.'

The handshake was slow and measured and Jack squeezed tightly and said, 'There's more to this, though, my good fellow. We were all in shock as I'd just found Tallon's body and we didn't quite know what to do about – it.'

'Get to the point, Jack! It's another nice day but I'm getting cold,' Mortimer said with a shiver.

'Your father thought that you killed Tallon,' Jack said. 'We let him leave with that assumption. I'm sorry, Mortimer. We didn't know what to do. No one can know about the usual business on the Sands. We had protect that above all else.'

Mortimer let go of the handshake and Jack waited for the punch, the knock that he deserved. He even recoiled in anticipation.

But, Mortimer threw back his head and laughed. 'My father might think me a courageous man now. Finally, he might listen to my plea to leave here. That is just the best news!'

Then, Jack watched a naked Mortimer walk away across the dunes.

## Chapter 33

Lola lay on Mortimer's couch, and tried not to cry. 'Being on this island has turned me into an emotional woman. It's pathetic. I cry at everything and I'm missing Jack. A lonesome woman is loathsome! For pity's sake!' Lola admitted to Mortimer's easel.

His face appeared from behind it and he said, 'Jack took the crates but there's to be another delivery any day now. He'll be back. He's only been gone a few days.'

'He's not been gone this long before and he never said goodbye to me,' Lola said, nibbling a nail. 'We had a falling out.'

'That doesn't surprise me.'

'He didn't want me to tell you the truth and then the ass went and told you anyhow! Are you laughing in there, where I cannot see you?'

'No,' Mortimer said with a chuckle. 'I'm listening. When you talk about him you glow, you know. I can see it and if you'd stay still I can paint it.'

'He's the most infuriating man!'

'You've said that a few times already this morning,' Mortimer reminded. 'I bet Jack's saying exactly the same thing about you to anyone who will listen.'

'Do you think there are still crowds on the shore?' Lola asked. 'Surely, they are fed up by now?'

'You'd think so,' Mortimer said. 'I was talking to Seanín. Things are improving.'

Lola sat upright. 'What else did he say?'

'Mr Childs wasn't in the form for talking to me, considering I was asking him questions about Ivan's death.'

'What kind of questions?'

Mortimer's grinning face came out from behind the easel. 'Was it a long and lingering passing for Tallon? Did he cry like a baby? That sort of thing. And I know I'm a bad person. But, I don't care. I feel nothing but gratitude to Seanín.'

'I understand,' Lola said, running a finger over the branding on her arm. She hadn't felt much at all when news of her husband's

death came.

‘I was also interested in knowing when father would return?’ Mortimer said. ‘I thought when Jack was back, I might hop aboard the *Fair Lass* and just leave this wretched place? I’m almost finished your portrait and I want to use it to apologise and ask him to bring me to London.’

‘Do you think that’s a good idea?’ Lola asked. ‘If you really want to go then I should come with you?’

‘If you come there might be a riot on the mainland,’ Mortimer said. ‘Even me going ashore is risky.’

‘We could go at night?’ Lola suggested.

‘It’s dangerous on the lough at night and Jack would never agree to that.’

‘Damn Jack Fitzgerald!’

‘You don’t mean that, Lola, my darling. You love him.’

Lola picked at her fingernail.

‘I do hope the rebels didn’t hear about the guns going missing for a time?’ Mortimer said, pouring them both a brandy. ‘As you say, it isn’t like the Fitzgeralds not to have those red sails upon Túr Lake for many days at a time. Especially in this fine weather.’

There was a gasp. Lola hadn’t realised that the rebels might’ve harmed Jack. It was silly of her not to think of that! ‘And I was angry with him. Of course, he was concerned about them and I failed to realise it. You don’t think anything bad has happened to him?’

Mortimer held his hand up and said, ‘Did you hear that?’

Lola had not heard anything other than the worried pounding in her chest. ‘No,’ she replied, listening as Mortimer was. Rua barked and started to scrape at the door to be let out.

‘There it was again,’ Mortimer said and he started heaving on clothes. ‘It’s like a gunshot. A thudding explosion. Listen.’

When Rua and the two of them got out by the lighthouse, there to the left, sitting splendid in the calm Atlantic Ocean was a tall ship. Her full sails were being taken in as the anchor dropped. The large vessel was hidden from the mainland by the island, but she was definitely making her presence known to those on the Sands. There was another shot and they watched until Seanín’s tiny rowboat was visible almost alongside.

Lola curled a hand inside Mortimer’s and whispered, ‘Jack’s guns are here.’

‘Seanín will need these as much as Jack,’ Mortimer said, gently pressing his own hands around hers. ‘He’s determined to make amends.’

‘Doesn’t it bother you that these weapons will be for killing English men?’ Lola asked. ‘Doesn’t it worry you?’

‘There is one case of weapons. Possibly two. Look,’ Mortimer said. ‘Against the might of the British army? I don’t think it’s going to make much difference. If the Fitzgeralds make their money and name on this kind of thing – who am I to spoil that?’

‘You’re a good man,’ Lola said, kissing his palm. His fingers were covered in paint. She kissed again. ‘We need to help you now, Mortimer. Leave that to me.’

Lola let the biting wind of the Atlantic Ocean nip at her cheeks. Many weeks ago now she had stood in a similar position. A lot had happened and changed since then. Closing both eyes Lola prayed to Mrs Beatty, the angels and anyone else who would listen. She wanted Jack back, she wanted to help dear Mortimer and she wished to stay on the Isle of Sands. It was all clear but how to get to that point was foggy.

Usually, Lola always had a plan and like that day on Rockford Pier with the swirling water and thoughts around her, she had no idea of what was ahead. Lola de Lacy would have to trust in her abilities and have faith that the prayers she had said would be answered.

‘Let’s go back to the folly?’ Mortimer said. ‘You’re shivering.’

Lola let him lead her but then she became tired and when she saw the gable of Beatty’s cottage she made for it instead. Mortimer didn’t object and didn’t follow. The afternoon greyed over and Lola still lay on the bed. There was nothing to do but wait. The Sands should have been like a prison but she liked to watch the clouds move past the half-door she left open these days. Polly bleated and Rua licked her wrist.

Lola never waited on a man she cared about before. It was not something enjoyable. There was even tension in her teeth. How was that possible? She relaxed her jaw and checked her reflection in the cracked mirror. ‘He’s not coming back to us,’ Lola said to Rua. ‘What on earth are we going to do if Jack C Fitzgerald doesn’t come back home to the Sands?’

Lola lay on the bed and cried. She hated crying. It was the most pointless exercise. Lola de Lacy refused to cry ever again over a

man. She'd never, ever cry again.

It was Rua's bark that woke Lola, the scraping at the door drove her from the covers. There was no sign of anyone and no noise but the breeze in the trees. She went to relieve herself in the outhouse and on the way back in, while rubbing her tired eyes, she saw boots. Shiny new boots. There were shapely male legs attached to them and a fine black jacket, red waistcoat, white shirt and a silk necktie. The moustache was unmistakable and the dark hair was clean and brushed.

'Hullo, Lola de Lacy,' the familiar man said.

'Jack C Fitzgerald, is that really you?' Lola asked, taking in all of the man before her. 'Look at your clothes.'

Jack did a twirl and bow and then another twirl. He was a beautiful man. But she wasn't going to tell him that.

'Where on earth have you been?' Lola stumbled in her bare feet. She attempted to fix her dishevelled hair and opened her mouth to speak but she couldn't.

'I thought that I'd come for the delivery I was expecting,' Jack said. 'I brought your correspondence.'

Lola held out a hand to receive the tied bundle in his hand. She could hold onto that hand if she wasn't stubborn. But there was no sign of apology in Jack's demeanour.

'And I saw Mortimer on the shore, swimming. He says he wants passage for you both to Rockford House.'

Lola hated standing in her nightdress while he was in his new finery. Rua was sniffing at Jack's tails and Lola gulped back a tear when he knelt to hold Rua and said, 'I've missed you.' He could have said that to her. But no. Lola left him on the doorstep and went into the cottage.

Jack called, 'I'll wait at the folly. It seems you and Mortimer have plans.'

Lola sat on the stool and Rua lay at her feet. Jack hadn't taken her in his arms and told her that he was sorry they'd argued about nothing at all. She hadn't run to him and gushed about his new clothes and how worried she was. It was so hard seeing him when she'd prayed for nothing else for days.

Lola picked her finest purple Parisian gown from the trunk. It was easy to dress in it alone but it was totally unsuitable for travelling in a drontheim. She was heading to Rockford House and if Jack could look dapper and unmovable, then she could look

beautiful too. Her neckline held her pearls and her purse of treasures tied under her petticoats next to her pistol. She picked a few daisies and put them in amongst the curls in her hair. Two could play at Jack Fitzgerald's game.

Mortimer let out a low whistle when he saw Lola come into the folly. Still Jack remained aloof.

'You look stunning,' Mortimer said while petting Rua. 'I've told Jack that we're going ashore. He thinks we are mad for there are still threats against your life. I can go alone, you know.'

'I'm going with you. I have business with Lord Rockford. I aim to ask him what is happening about this pier for one thing.' Lola saw a glimmer of annoyance on Jack's face. 'Are Patrick and Michael on the *Fair Lass*?' Lola asked. 'Might they look after Rua?'

'You can ask them,' Jack said. 'Let's go. I warn you, though, I'll not protect either of you ashore. I'm not paid enough for that kind of job.'

Jack turned on his heel and said, 'If you're coming. Come on now.'

'He's already been to the caves and I've brought the painting to the boat,' Mortimer whispered to Lola on the walk to the landing place. 'All is well with the weapons. Seanín helped Jack with them. I can see, though, that you've not made amends with our Jack. Did you not tell him about your plans and talk with him about your future together?'

Lola swished the hem of her dress in reply and checked quickly on her garter and its contents.

'You two are far too stubborn for your own good!' Mortimer whispered. 'Do you think my father will agree to receive me if he is at Rockford House?'

'Leave that to me.'

Patrick and Michael's welcome was kind. They helped Lola aboard and winked when she sat down. Mortimer was nervous and talked non-stop about everything and nothing. He required no conversation, though, and kept up babbling to himself. Patrick and Michael kept Lola and Jack in their sight line on the quick passage to Rockford Pier. Lola would not give in to the longing and the pain in her heart. As they came in towards Rockford Pier, she removed the large pistol from under her dress.

Patrick blessed himself and grinned as Lola readied herself to go ashore. There was a hum of movement and disquiet from the crowd

but she cocked the weapon and aimed at a few and they moved back from the steps. The murmurs grew louder as Lola adjusted her dress and breathed deeply. She could kill with one pistol shot if necessary. Mortimer took her shaking arm in his and they strode down the pier, heading for the main road. Rua bounded after them and Lola turned them all to the right. She knew the direction but not what awaited them there.

‘It’s a long walk,’ Lola said, looking at the muddy road with large holes of mucky water ahead. ‘We should have thought of this.’

‘We will enjoy the weather,’ Mortimer said, looking back to see if they were being followed. ‘Didn’t Jack look splendid? Lola, you do know he dressed up for you. He wanted you to see him as a gentleman. Why on earth didn’t you two make amends?’

Lola touched a falling daisy from her hair and replaced it back in its spot. She had dressed for Jack but he’d not commented on that either.

‘I really want to knock your heads together,’ Mortimer said. ‘Mind that hole. You’ll ruin your shoes. Jack will now think you dressed like this for my father! It’s not fair on the man to torture him.’

Lola blinked. Was she hearing her friend correctly?

‘You can sort everyone else’s loves and lives, but not your own,’ Mortimer said.

Lola looked at her shoe. If it hadn’t been for the road being so mucky she’d’ve taken it off and flogged him with it.

# Chapter 34

The shocked crowd moved back and gawped after the Temptress and the Lord of the Sands. The pair of them had left the pier without much chaos. Rua even abandoned Jack in his finery to follow Lola. Patrick puffed on his pipe as Michael hauled the large bale of smelly wool to the side of the boat.

‘You really should follow them, Jack,’ Patrick said. ‘You could let them wait on the horse and cart that’s coming here now?’

‘Let them walk!’ Jack pulled at his collar. It was high and stiff and bothersome.

‘Did she notice your fancy clobber?’ Michael asked. ‘Cause I need you to take them off and help me with this wool?’

Patrick handed Jack his pipe and lugged the load onto the net for the pulley.

‘This wool has been moved about a lot today and thanks to the Temptress, no one has noticed it returning ashore again,’ Michael whispered. They pulled and swung their concealed cargo onto the pier. Lola and the Lord of the Sands proved a good distraction for the Fitzgeralds but Jack took hold of an oar just in case anyone saw the crates being unloaded. If there was any sight of trouble, he would have to take action.

‘The village will be full of gossip tonight,’ Patrick said, taking his pipe back and sucking on it. ‘That Temptress is as stubborn as you are.’

‘She’s running off to Lord Rockford,’ Jack said through a tight jaw. ‘It’s not me who’s the stubborn one.’

‘You’re giving the lass no option. And she’s taking Mortimer to see his father. That’s the reason she braved the crowds. What a woman she is! And all she needed was for you to step up and be a man. But no! You’d rather be an ass.’

Jack spat and covered his ears like he used to when his father gave out.

‘She’ll need me before I need her. She’s going to want back out there for one thing.’ Jack pointed towards the island.

‘Mortimer told me that she had him dig up her treasure box a



few days ago. She might not come back to the Sands. What then?' Michael asked. 'All that's left out there for her is Polly and a few old trinkets. And look, they've left this behind.'

There was a rectangle wrapped in brown paper and string. Michael said, 'It has your name on it, Jack.'

The string pulled and unveiled a painting.

'It's a masterpiece.' Michael blushed red.

For there lay Jack's Lola without her clothes, draped in blue fabric. Lola's determination glowed from the eyes of the portrait. Her arm hung across the couch and the curve of her pale breasts were adorned with even paler pearls and capped with perfect nipples. The sheer blue fabric hinted at the nakedness underneath as did Lola's smile. She was most definitely a temptress. Jack's beautiful Irish temptress lay before him in oils... but not in reality. Jack peered at the road. They were almost gone from sight. He cursed loudly.

Patrick pulled on his sleeve. 'Never mind drooling at that and tell me – would she ever tell the truth about Seanín? Did she promise you her silence?'

'I trust her,' Jack said, yet he glanced at the road. 'She'd know it would ruin me. Seanín wouldn't hold his tongue if he was questioned and I'd be arrested. She'd never do that.'

'Would Mortimer stay quiet?' Michael asked in a low whisper. 'Would he ruin us all? Lola included?'

Jack heaved hard at the necktie. He wasn't a man for such constriction.

'You should've at the very least made her promise to stay quiet on the matter,' Patrick puffed as he spoke. 'But oh no, big man Jack wouldn't give a woman the satisfaction of apologising or asking her for anything. Instead, we're going to have to wait it out and sit back and pray that they don't ruin all we've worked for.'

'Does she love you?' Michael asked. 'They say a woman in love is a powerful thing.'

'And it's also a dangerous thing. Especially if the woman feels abandoned and scorned. I warned you,' Patrick said, 'you cannot play with fire and not expect to get burned.'

Lola was the fire in Jack's heart. His father was always right. Jack closed his eyes and there she was with her raven hair and pink lips. 'That's that,' Jack said and forced the emotion down. 'The painting will do me grand and what peace we will have when life

returns to normal.'

'Do you think we could build that pier after all?' Michael suggested. 'We've the money to invest in some of it ourselves once we move this shipment on. We might all get a pot together and we'd not need the likes of Lord Rockford at all? We've some supplies already and the men are all set for work.'

Jack was listening but his mind was whirring. She had wanted him to take her in his arms at Beatty's cottage. He didn't do it. He hadn't told her that they were truly perfect together and that he needed her to survive. Even Mrs B's voice urged him to kiss his Lola. The sight of that almost translucent shift and the loose black curls in the painting pressurised him to the point of physical pain. The mound of her breasts heaving and waiting, the curve of belly, the length of shadowy thigh – all of her was there to be touched. He hadn't said anything to her, didn't touch her wrist and tell her that he loved her. Jack cursed again.

The road was empty. Lola was gone.

Jack stood there in his fancy clothes and watched the space where she last was. She hadn't looked back. But of course, Lola never did that.

'I look ridiculous,' Jack said, loosening his collar.

Patrick and Michael said nothing as they all waited on the man with his horse and cart.

'We might catch up with them, if the cart isn't too long coming?' Jack said, straining to see if he was on his way. 'But what good would that do?'

Patrick rolled his eyes.

'We need to get this load out of the wool and buried at the house,' Michael said in a hiss. 'We cannot be lugging it up the road and into the laps of the gentry.'

Michael was right. Jack had priorities and responsibilities. 'We'll have to trust them both,' Jack said and blessed himself. 'I'll have to trust Lola.' Yet, that wasn't the real reason he wished to catch up with them.

There was a trundling of a cart coming towards them. The road behind him was empty.

The men left the pier. Jack removed the fine clothes at their house in the village. He drove a nail to hang his painting and heard the others digging the hole for the guns. Jack hated the sound. He hadn't been himself since he buried Ivan Tallon. When Jack lost

control, he lost his temper and now he'd lost Lola. He helped finish the burying of the guns in silence and covered the site in stones and replanted the weeds as Lola had done.

She had dug up her treasure. She had no intention of returning to the Sands. Neither she nor Mortimer mentioned needing passage back. They were with their own kind now and he was back in working clothes. Everyone was where they belonged.

The noise and smoke in the pub didn't ease his thoughts. The whiskey burned the back of his throat and Jack sighed in resignation. The talk was all about the Temptress.

'And she's gone. They were right to let her bring the sickness and evil to the Big House. That'll sort the lot of them bastards up there,' the barman said.

'Is she still at Rockford House?' Jack asked. 'I'm wondering if she wants passage back to the Sands?'

'She'd better be gone for good,' was the reply. 'The servants say that Lord Rockford is taking his son with him back to London and she's going with them. The carriage is made ready for the journey.'

Jack asked, 'I wonder will he still be needing a pier on the Sands?'

There was no reply.

Lola was gone.

A drunken Jack let his father carry him home. Once he smelt the scent he associated with his mother in the house, Jack C Fitzgerald cried. All the women he loved in his life – were gone.

# Chapter 35

The fancy carriage left Lola and Rua at Rockford Pier. Lola moved the hood of a dark cloak to shield her cheeks from the biting September wind coming in from the Atlantic. The rowboat she was expecting, with the dark-red sails, was visible and getting closer. Three familiar heads aboard toiled against the tide and waves.

It had been many months since Lola had breathed in the Irish air of Túr Lake and her belly fluttered like the shawl around her shoulders. She had anticipated this moment for weeks. There were no crowd of people baying for her blood and there were only a few whispers about ‘the Temptress’.

Travelling alone was risky but she had the ever faithful Rua with her. Mortimer was not for coming back to the Sands but she couldn’t stay away any longer. Lola placed a hand to her forehead and there it was, the island she had dreamed about. The only place she’d ever felt was home.

The clouds parted and the mood lifted as the small boat dropped its red sails. A holler from the drontheim boat made the shoremen clamber down the stone steps. They called back that they’d take the line in so that the wooden hull could pull alongside.

Lola stood forward so she could be seen from below.

The man with a cap, in the aft of the wooden craft, cursed loudly and glared upwards. There he was. Lola’s Jack C Fitzgerald.

With her gaze fixed on the handsome boatman she said as confidently as she could muster, ‘I am for the Isle of Sands.’

He came level with her as he took the steps two at a time. ‘Are you now?’ he replied. ‘We have a fine pier out there now but it is still no place for a lady travelling alone.’

‘I’ve always been an independent woman. I’ll survive.’

‘You do know that it is a cursed island and it’ll cost a small fortune for me to take a temptress such as yourself in my *Fair Lass*,’ Jack said.

‘I have means,’ Lola said, moving towards the stone steps.

‘Can I assist you?’ Jack asked.

‘I’m a dancer. I’ll manage.’

‘No trunk?’

Lola shook her ringlets. ‘I’m free of all baggage.’

Patrick called out from the boat, ‘Welcome back, Madame de Lacy.’

Lola smiled and waved and Michael took off his cap and nodded.

Lola stood firm and looked out on the lake. The fancy houses, London and even Paris had been nothing to compare to this. Jack’s broad frame shielded her from the sun and there were those eyes she missed so much. Fingers curled around her wrist and a moustache tickled her ear. A soft whisper said, ‘Is it really you my Irish temptress?’ There was a light kiss to her cheek. ‘Have you come from the Big House?’

‘I have and I’ve left all of that behind me.’

‘There aren’t many people on the island. What makes you think that this is a good idea? Look out there, Mrs de Lacy and tell me why you wouldn’t want back into the splendour of Rockford House instead?’

‘Mortimer is settled in London and I’ve just delivered a new bride to Lord Rockford. There’s no place for me anywhere else, and there never was. Now, are you going to take me to the Sands or am I going to have to swim?’

‘I’ll see you get there safe and sound. I promise,’ Jack said with a smile. ‘But, I hope that you’ll stay this time?’

‘One step at a time, Mr Jack C Fitzgerald.’ Lola smiled as she got into the boat and greeted Patrick and Michael.

Jack followed and bent forward. His nose tipped Lola’s cheek and she held her breath. ‘I thought you were gone,’ he whispered. ‘I couldn’t bear it. Nothing has been the same. I’ve missed you.’

Lola reached inside the fold of her dress and from her pocket she took the angel Jack carved.

‘She brought me back to you,’ Lola said, smoothing the wood over in her glove. ‘I think she’s our guardian angel.’

Jack’s fingers entwined with her gloved ones. ‘Am I still only allowed one question a day?’ Jack asked.

‘It all depends what you ask.’

‘I love you,’ Jack said and held her warm cheek in the palm of his rough hand. ‘My question is, do you love me?’

‘Kiss me, Jack C Fitzgerald. Before we go. Kiss me,’ Lola whispered.

‘I’ll be gentle,’ Jack said, and, breathing deeply, his lips touched

Lola's. He tasted the same as before and smelt of the sea.

'We're perfect together.' Lola sighed.

'You're one infuriating woman. For god's sake answer my question,' Jack said.

'I love you, Jack. Now, please take me home?' Lola said and stood on tiptoes to kiss him.

When the wind caught the deep-red sails, it gave the boat and Lola a surge of momentum. It would take Jack's family a few tacks to reach the island's shore. With her hand in his, Lola sat steadfast. This was going to be their journey to a new life together. It was going to be perfect.

# The End

*Would you like to read more from Lola and Jack?*

*If you have enjoyed their tale please leave a star rating or review  
wherever you can.*

*This will help the author and bring Lola and Jack back for more  
adventures on the Isle of Sands.*

# Coming Soon

**'THE DEVIL COMES'**

**by Penny Best**

It is said throughout Donegal that Lady Clara Burnhart's husband sold his soul to the devil on Christmas Eve, 1799. It only took a year and a day for the devil to claim his due.

Now, Lady Clara rules Foyle Castle with a rod of iron, but she seeks more power.

When clever Clara makes deals with greedy Irish chieftains and brutal pirates, will her lust for money and men be satisfied... before the devil himself comes?



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